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THE TRIUMPH OF COUNT OSTERMANN

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THE TRIUMPH OF COUNT OSTERMANN

BY

GRAHAM HOPE

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HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1903

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DEDICATED,

IN A SPIRIT OF CLANNISH LOYALTY TO

THE NOVELIST AND STATESMAN

WHO, ONE BY ADOPTION AND THE OTHER BY GRACE,

HAVE ADDED FRESH HONOR TO THE

NAME WE BEAR

NOTE

THE germ of this story is due to Mr. Nisbet Bain's *Daughter of Peter the Great*, and it owes many of its details to the kindness of Professor Morfill, author of *The History of Russia.*

Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The First Temptation of Count Ostermann	1
II.	The Open Door	10
III.	The Favor of the Tzar	22
IV.	The Reel's Reward	37
V.	Seven Years Ago	50
VI.	The Fate of Christian Gordon	61
VII.	The Burden of the Double Crowns	77
VIII.	Princess and Peasant	86
IX.	Walter Lindsay	97
X.	The Second Temptation of Count Ostermann	105
XI.	La Chêtardie's Desire	113
XII.	The Smell of the Sea	121
XIII.	The Passing of Peter	131
XIV.	Marfa's Friends	140
XV.	Marfa's Steward	150
XVI.	Petrushka	159
XVII.	Like the Waves of the Sea	167
XVIII.	Marfa's Essay in Humility	180

CHAPTER PAGE
XIX. A Human Sacrifice 190
XX. Nadejda 199
XXI. Nadejda's Key 210
XXII. Anna Ivanovna 221
XXIII. Marfa Travels Far 233
XXIV. Pavel's Enthusiasm 242
XXV. The Love of Women 252
XXVI. The Return of La Chêtardie 261
XXVII. The Failure of Count Ostermann 272
XXVIII. La Chêtardie's Condition 285
XXIX. The Midnight Crisis 297
XXX. Life or Death 310
XXXI. The Triumph of Count Ostermann 321

The Triumph of Count Ostermann

CHAPTER I

The First Temptation of Count Ostermann

THE Marquis yawned.

It was a deliberate, aggressively insolent yawn; emphasized, rather than hidden, by the long, white hand, glittering with magnificent jewels, which he raised half-way to his mouth. His theory was that wasted time is a gain to the diplomat who wastes it. So he yawned twice. Yet, in reality, he had never felt more keenly alive.

Monsieur Campredon was ill, and thus his subordinate at the French Embassy had got his chance. It seemed to the young aristocrat that the future of his order was at stake in this moment. If, by a brilliant stroke, he could bring off the alliance between France and Russia, then the victory of the nobles would be assured; they would no longer be held in bondage, diplomatically, to the hated bourgeois. Since the time of Richelieu the important Government offices

had gone to people of inferior birth and doubtful manners. The great Cardinal had established the theory that nobles were merely useful as ornaments of a splendid Court, or as leaders of dashing cavalry in the field; and Louis the Fourteenth knew enough of history to be aware that they took advantage of provincial power or foreign influence solely to further their own ends. The Regent had followed his uncle's example in this; but he was dead now, Louis the Well-beloved reigned, and the aristocrats might hope once more.

Now Monsieur Campredon had admitted that it would please his Government to have an alliance with Russia, though he frankly despaired of bringing it about; but the young Marquis de la Chêtardie knew no fear. He was no timid, middle-class official; he was a man of the world. The King should see the difference in the results of this interview. He knew what men were, and he glanced across the table at the Russian Minister with a slightly contemptuous smile.

Ostermann was a German. Good. He need not pretend to have patriotic scruples. He was the son of an obscure Lutheran pastor, so should respond readily to judicious flattery from a man of the exalted rank of his present opponent. He was also drawing the salary of a clerk. Well, it would be easier to buy than to flatter, and would cost the buyer's dignity less.

On the other hand it was a little difficult to say straight out: "How much will you take?" and this thick-headed German peasant showed himself curiously dense where M. de la Chêtardie's hints were concerned. Thus he was driven to yawn as a means of hiding his perplexity and gaining, or wasting, time. Perhaps he secretly hoped to irritate his adversary, and bring him to the point. If so, he might congratulate himself on scoring something like a success.

For the first time that morning Ostermann spoke out.

"There is one objection that Monsieur le Marquis seems to have overlooked."

"Yes?"

"The distance."

"The distance! I fail to understand."

Ostermann permitted himself an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders.

"Doubtless the difficulty occurred to Monsieur le Marquis so long ago that he had forgotten it."

La Chêtardie bit his lip. Was this son of a German peasant trying to laugh at him? He answered sharply:

"On the contrary, I cannot yet guess what you mean."

"No?"

Ostermann's tone of bland surprise chafed the younger man still more.

"Let us be plain with each other, Count. Neither has much to gain by such elaborate fencing."

"My objection is, to put it briefly, the five or six hundred leagues that lie between us and Paris."

The Marquis beat the floor impatiently with his foot.

"Your words do not throw much light on the position. I must confess that my mind remains unilluminated."

Ostermann bowed smilingly.

"I regret that I am too stupid to make my meaning plain. Monsieur le Marquis is aware that the value of an alliance depends upon the allied parties being in complete harmony with each other. If they have to act, they should act simultaneously; otherwise their alliance is a source of weakness to both."

"Well?"

"It seems to me that unless some new means of communication between the two countries can be found, there is no use in discussing a treaty. The journey is long and expensive. Your couriers come and go at rare intervals even in times of peace, and when the state of the roads renders traveling easy. In the winter, when the passes are blocked with soft, freshly fallen snow, or in spring or autumn, when swollen torrents sweep away the bridges, there are many delays on the route

between my master's capital and yours. In time of preparation for war it would be almost impossible for a messenger to traverse the whole of Germany in safety; and unless our Governments were in touch, their plans would fail."

The Russian Minister spoke simply, anxious to impress the real facts of the case on his listener. Now he leant back in his chair, as if his argument had clinched the matter.

If la Chêtardie had desired plain speaking, he should have been satisfied. Indeed for a moment the truth staggered him. The treaty would be worthless if it should be made. He soon rallied, however. His object was to secure the honor of having brought about the alliance; its practical advantages mattered nothing to him. Europe had had its fill of war; and while peace lasted, the hollowness of a treaty would not be discovered. He faced Ostermann once more with a resolute smile.

"Worse difficulties have been overcome by energy and a little timely generosity."

He spoke the last words slowly, and was conscious that his point had gone home. The pale face opposite flushed faintly, yet Count Ostermann's voice showed no emotion as he answered:

"The Government of His Most Christian Majesty possesses both, no doubt, in a higher degree than that of my master; still the gulf between

the two countries would seem too wide to be spanned even by a golden bridge."

The Marquis misunderstood. He listened only to the first words and sprang to the conclusion at which he wished to arrive. They were meant as a taunt. This insolent German distrusted the power of the French King to pay for what he wanted. He fancied France was bankrupt because the Regent had trusted overmuch to speculation. He did not object to being bought, but he wished to make sure of the depth of his purchaser's purse.

The Marquis smiled in the certainty of triumph. After all, it would not take a vast sum to buy a clerk dependent on his pay; a foreigner, moreover, who could not pretend to patriotic scruples. He made a hasty calculation as to the amount required. His chief reason for hesitation was a fastidious dislike to soiling his own fingers by doing the dirty work himself. Monsieur Campredon bought all the Russian officials he wanted, without difficulty; but then he was a bourgeois and used to the trade.

La Chêtardie glanced at his companion, and found no encouragement to begin. Ostermann was, of course, a greedy peasant; yet, outwardly, the fellow looked like a gentleman. His features were clearly cut and wore an air of refinement, due, possibly, to a suggestion of delicacy in the

thin cheeks and high, lined forehead. The heavy, curled wig made deep shadows, which accentuated the oval of the face. The dark eyes and finely curved mouth spoke of melancholy and sensitiveness. A mere mask, the Frenchman decided; but even so, its effect was impressive.

Then the Marquis had an idea. With a sudden movement he seized a map of Europe lying on the table, unrolled it, and began operations.

"I ask Your Excellency's attention for a moment. I can make my views quite plain now. If we are unable to decrease the distance between Paris and Saint Petersburg, we can, at least, increase the speed of our couriers. A well-organized system of relays would prove effective; so I propose establishing post-houses all along the route, here, and here, and here."

He drew some neat rouleaus of gold from his pocket, and put them down methodically to mark the places he pointed out. He was well provided with money; for he was on the way to dine with the English agent, where he must play high and late. Soon the little piles scattered over the map represented a large amount; yet the Vice-Chancellor still leant back in his chair, and made no sign.

Was the price not high enough? Why should he expect more? Perhaps he had received higher offers. Then the English must have been at work. Miserable islanders, who thought of noth-

ing save money, and spent it so lavishly that all who came in contact with them grew insatiably grasping! For once, the Marquis de la Chêtardie thought kindly of the Pretender. He was the best card that France could play. The Marquis made one more effort. Taking off a valuable diamond ring, he laid it on the site of the new town.

"From here to Paris seems less far now, Count! At least it may when you have studied the line I suggest. Shall I leave you now to think it over?"

He rose to go, but Ostermann detained him.

"Wait, Monsieur!"

He turned back eagerly. The Russian Minister had not moved.

"May I ask you to take the trouble to collect all that before you go? Your counters are too valuable to be left lying about."

"Not at all," urged the Marquis smoothly, "if they do anything to aid you in calculating how to overcome the obstacles to an alliance."

"You must forgive me, Monsieur, for insisting. I quite understand how valueless they are in your eyes, except as markers in your game; but I am not strong, and the strain of taking care of so much treasure would be too great for me. I could not hope to replace it if it were lost; for I am, as all the world knows, a very poor man."

There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, as

though he resented the ostentatious display of wealth the Marquis had made. Otherwise he did not acknowledge a suspicion that a bribe had been intended. The absence of virtuous indignation rather surprised the Frenchman. Why refuse money unless he wished to make a theatrical declaration of incorruptibility?

La Chêtardie put on his ring, and swept the golden counters into a glittering heap; paused for the fraction of a second, then dropped the louis back into his own pockets. Ostermann watched silently; neither offering to help, nor changing his expression of quiet indifference. He rose when it was done, and bowed his farewell as courteously as he had welcomed his visitor.

The Marquis went away, thoughtful, but not much discouraged. He could not understand his opponent, but he did not believe in him any the more for that. He was a friend of Monsieur Arouet, and doubted all that passed his comprehension. There must be some simple explanation of the German's conduct. If not, if he were driven to believe him honest, he would fall back on other means to attain his end. A woman might do much, or a skilfully contrived hint, to breed suspicion in the Tzar's mind. The man must bend or break. That la Chêtardie swore.

CHAPTER II

The Open Door

WHEN his visitor was gone, Ostermann stood still for some minutes, gazing at the outspread map. He was more annoyed than he cared to admit by this insolent attempt to buy him. A few years ago he would have laughed at it as a joke. Every one of his colleagues was venal, and it would have amused him to think how disconcerted the would-be giver must be at having come to the wrong man. But to-day things were different. Every foreign agent had recognized long ago that there was one honest man in Russia, and they all respected him accordingly. Even a fool wins a grudging admiration when he is known to be true to a principle, and Count Ostermann was not a fool.

This insolent young French Marquis had insulted him because he was poor. There was the sting. A German must have come to Russia to make his fortune, la Chêtardie would argue; and if he had remained poor, it could not be from choice. He could not imagine that a foreigner was capable of serving the Tzar for any but

mercenary considerations; and Peter made it clear to the world that wealth could not be come by honestly in his service. It was that which annoyed his Foreign Minister most. He did not care about money; he had few wants; but he resented being exposed to such an insult as he had received that morning.

The striking of a clock roused him from his mood of self-absorption. He looked up, laughed, and brushed some dust from his coat-sleeve. It was ridiculous to let himself be vexed by such passing trifles. The incident should become an amusing memory. Now, the most serious question was whether he would be late for the Tzar's banquet at the Post Office. He seized his three-cornered hat, threw his cloak over his arm, and hurried off.

The ordeal before him was not light. Peter was giving one of his interminable feasts, and, well or ill, his invited guests must attend. As his own palaces were small, he chose the Post Office as the scene of his pleasures. Two long tables creaked under the weight of heavy dishes. The air was thick with the steam of hot meats. The servants were busied in keeping the goblets and glasses full; for the assembly was a thirsty one, and the Tzar loved hard drinkers.

When Ostermann arrived, the cooks had just brought in the last trays of roasted joints; and

as he took his place, not far from the great Peter, one of the attendants locked the doors.

"You are late," the Tzar said, frowning.

"I beg His Majesty's forgiveness. The French Ambassador asked for an interview, and kept me longer than usual."

"But Monsieur Campredon is ill," Peter returned with a flash of angry suspicion.

Any suspicion of a lie irritated him and made him fear concealed treachery; but Ostermann's unruffled calm was reassuring as he answered:

"Yes, Your Majesty; his place was taken by the Marquis de la Chêtardie."

"That young man is a conceited fool! Those elegant French monkeys have no more brains than an ape. The more a man puts on his back, the less wits he has in his head."

Peter stared at one of his guests who was wearing a costume of pale rose-colored satin with ruffles of the finest lace. The young man grew conscious of the look fixed on him, and blushed uneasily.

"Ah! you may well blush, Kyril Petrovitch! I did not send you abroad to learn how to trick yourself out like a popinjay. I desired you to learn how to serve your country. You must dress plainly and work hard, for you don't own more than a thousand souls. If you wear finery fit for a king, you will have to sell your peasants,

and that is what I will not tolerate. Remember they are human beings like yourself, and if they fall into bad hands, a curse will rest upon you."

The Tzar made a sign to one of the servants, who brought him a large silver cup half full of wine. Peter added brandy, pepper, and spice; then addressed the young man once more.

"Here, my little Kyril, is a draught you must drink to the health of the country, and your own return to good sense."

The youthful dandy rose to receive the cup sent by his sovereign. He had no notion of its contents, and secretly congratulated himself on his good fortune in attracting so much attention. Hard words affected him little at any time, least of all when they came from a mere barbarian like his master, a man ignorant of the French modes and incapable of appreciating them. Peter's speech had been wasted on him. It was as if one struck at a butterfly with a sledge-hammer; the butterfly merely fluttered out of reach.

Kyril took the silver flagon from the attendant, bowed gracefully, and raised it high in the air.

"I drink to the most generous of masters," he said gaily.

One long draught he swallowed before he realized what it was. The strong drink burnt like fire, the pepper caught his throat. He grew crimson with pain and shame as a roar of laugh-

ter greeted the first signs of his discomfiture. Coughing, choking, spluttering, his eyes full of tears, he turned appealingly to the Tzar.

"Have pity, most gracious Emperor. I cannot drink any more of this stuff."

"Nonsense, little brother!" laughed his tormentor, in high good humor once more. "Every true Russian drinks what he is given by his comrades. Besides, you must do full honor to the toast you chose. If you were drinking to your own return to good sense, as I proposed, you might have been let off; but when you toast the Tzar there must be no heel-taps."

The wretched boy looked round despairingly for help; and found none. Every man at the table, save two, was grinning delightedly. The exceptions were Ostermann and his right-hand neighbor. The first was out of tune with his surroundings. Everything jarred on him to-day, even this little scene which neither affected him personally nor had any novelty in his eyes. He made it a rule to ignore what he could not prevent; yet for once he found the principle difficult to apply. The other serious spectator was a Scotchman with a possibly deficient sense of humor, for he was disgusted rather than amused by the scene. Yet he knew himself to be powerless to interfere, so sat staring moodily at his plate.

It was soon over. The very strength of the

drink was merciful, for it brought a rapid loss of consciousness. When the victim had subsided, Ostermann looked round. The guests were representative of Peter's many-sided mind: a sprinkling of learned or scientific men; the captain and first mate of a Dutch trading-vessel, just arrived in harbor; adventurers of many nationalities, every rank, and all shades of color; the minority were Russians, princes and peasants sitting side by side. The diverse gathering of men possessed only two essentials in common: brains, and the favor of the Tzar. One fool had come that day, but he lay out of sight beside his chair in a stained, disordered suit of pale rose-color.

The Scotchman drew a deep breath of relief. He had spent the last three years on the Eastern frontier, and was new to the ways of the Court. He glanced doubtfully at his neighbors. Prince Dolgorouki, on his right, had stopped laughing at last, and was devoting himself to the voluntary consumption of strong liquor. Much laughter had increased his thirst. Ostermann, on the left, was more sympathetic; but the Scotchman was inclined to resent his policy of non-interference.

"If I were a Minister, instead of a subaltern—" he began.

Ostermann turned his head.

"Yes, Monsieur?"

"How can you bear it?"

"You have a proverb about enduring what you can't cure."

"Yes, but if I were—if I had any power—"

"You would soon learn its limits. It is only very young men who dream of putting their world to rights."

Lindsay frowned. His youth was a sore subject.

"Older men always say that sort of thing to save themselves trouble."

"Possibly, Monsieur, it is only to avoid the failure which results from attempting the impossible."

"I should not call that failure. The leader of a forlorn hope dies, but he does not fail."

"And death seems easy—at a distance?"

"It is far better than the dishonor of living in servile acquiescence in what one holds to be a wrong. I would rather kill a man myself than be a complacent accomplice in a murder."

Ostermann shrugged his shoulders. His neighbor was very young. His glance wandered down the table. He observed life as a tranquil spectator, and made the best of what came his way. It was no use breaking his heart over what he could not help. The men were still busy eating. Ostermann's gaze went on to the women's table. Catherine set a good example to the feasters there.

Though their appetites might be less, their capacity for drinking was as great as that of their husbands. But one was backward in copying her mistress's example. She was a small, slight girl of about seventeen, and she was trying to shelter herself behind the broad shoulders of the woman next her, whose size was her chief claim to be considered a great lady.

The girl was gazing with the fascination of helpless terror at the noisy banqueters. Her eyes met those of the Foreign Minister in dumb appeal. Would he save her? He looked kind and was sober. He read the message, and some half-forgotten chivalrous instinct stirred within him. He knew well what lay before her. More than once he had feigned complete intoxication to escape taking an active part in the disgusting orgies which were the end of such feasts. This girl would be exposed to the insults of men degraded to the level of beasts, absolutely without restraint, and too drunk to realize the torture they inflicted. No one would dream of interfering, not even the hot-headed young Scotchman, or if he did, it would be useless.

At that moment Peter raised his voice.

"My friends, I have prepared a little surprise for you. Two dishes are coming which I hope you will be able to enjoy, although you have eaten well already."

He made a sign to one of the servants, who unlocked the door and flung it open. Four cooks entered, carrying two pies of unusual dimensions. The sight served to sober some of the guests. They could eat no more, but who dare disobey the Tzar? Even Prince Dolgorouki turned pale. Prince Menschikoff muttered thickly that he had never sold pies as big as those, so he should not be compelled to eat them. The Tzar paid no heed to the murmurs. Turning to his principal guest, he said:

"When I was in your country, my lord, I heard a tale of a king who gave a banquet at which was served a great number of birds in a pie. When he cut the pastry, out flew the birds to delight the company with their songs. Now I, too, wànt music, but not from little birds. They are best killed and plucked before they appear at dinner. Take the other dish to the Empress. Now we are ready."

He seized a carving-knife, flourished it in the air, and then attacked the crust with some caution. What was coming next? Catherine was following his lead, but with more care. She seemed almost afraid of what she might find. The spectators watched and wondered; the Englishman rather perplexed by the allusion to a nursery rhyme. The suspense did not last long. First a head appeared in either dish, then came a vig-

orous upheaval of the pastry covering, and finally there emerged the Tzar's favorite dwarfs. The little woman on the men's table, the tiny man before the Tzaritza, bowed to the assembly and burst into song. They seemed none the worse for their late imprisonment; and neither was more embarrassed than was the majority of the audience by their complete absence of clothes. Only the woman drew her long hair closer round her, as if she felt the cold.

Again the Scotchman sought comfort in studying his plate; but Ostermann shot a quick glance at the girl whose eyes had appealed to him a few minutes before. She was crimson with shame, for the song of the dwarfs was as free from conventional restraints as their bodies were from garments, and her neighbor's tongue made matters still plainer. The revel was about to begin now. There was a general movement among the men. Peter's negro favorite was already going towards the women's table. Until now he had been sitting with his back to the girl, and the sight of his face added to her terror. She had never seen a black man before, and evidently looked on him as the devil in person. She sprang to her feet, desperately seeking a way of escape.

Ostermann watched her. He was thinking rapidly. The Scotchman's taunts had stung him,

and his nerves were out of order that day. Now that the girl had risen, he could see her long plaits, tied with bright ribbons. She was a child, with no husband to protect her, and apparently no claim upon any man in that disorderly crew. If her father were there, surely she would have rushed to implore his help. Her obvious uncertainty touched the Vice-Chancellor. Something must be done, and there was no one else to do it.

The cooks advanced to the tables, lifted the empty dishes, and began carrying them away. Now was the moment to act. Ostermann looked at the girl, met her eyes, and rose.

"Will His Majesty graciously deign to excuse me? I was interrupted in writing the despatch to Sweden, and it is necessary for the courier to start at dawn to-morrow."

"What did you say, Andrei Ivanovitch? A despatch? Why didn't you do your work before coming here?"

"Because the visit of Monsieur de la Chêtardie left me no time."

"Well, you shall be let off for once; but this must not occur again. You spoil our digestions by your talk of work, to say nothing of your own; and I hate to see a pleasant party broken up. Vassili, you may let His Excellency pass."

The doors had been unlocked to let the cooks out; and the man in charge of the key stood aside,

waiting for the Foreign Minister. Ostermann walked slowly, looked back as if he had lost something, and paused for a moment almost on the threshold. The girl was no fool. Terrified though she was, she made no sign until the way was clear and her accomplice waiting. Then she ran, swift as a wild deer, past the long table where the men gaped at her in drunken surprise, past the bewildered servant, through the doorway, and down a long passage. She was out of sight when the lock grated behind Ostermann.

"Clever, but not courteous," he said to himself, smiling. "She might have stopped to say 'thank you.' I hope she lives on this island, or she won't be much better off. Not a boat will be allowed to leave before midnight."

CHAPTER III

The Favor of the Tzar

COUNT OSTERMANN entered his master's cabinet next morning with some anxiety concealed under his usual air of quiet confidence. He had committed a grave crime in conniving at the escape of the new Maid of Honor, and he was prepared to find himself in disgrace. His ready tongue would probably save him from any serious consequences, but he was sure of a disagreeable half-hour before he was pardoned.

He found Peter seated at his writing-table, meditatively balancing his heavy staff. Most of his favorites knew its weight by personal experience; many of them welcomed a few blows from it as the easiest way of escaping severer punishment. Ostermann looked at it and then at the Tzar with equal unconcern.

"You impudent rascal! You trade on my forbearance," was the answer growled to his greeting.

"I hardly understand, Sire."

"Oh! You know very well that if it had been any one else I should have flogged him till my arm ached, but you—"

"Has Your Majesty cause to complain of my conduct of foreign affairs?"

"Don't pretend to be a fool!"

Ostermann was silent, and his master fondled his great stick.

"Come now, little brother, a few blows need not make ill blood between us. I have beaten Menschikoff a hundred times, yet we are as good friends as ever."

"I cannot claim to be considered a second Menschikoff."

"Do you think yourself a better man than my best friend? Do you despise him because he was a baker's boy?"

"Certainly not, Sire. I hold, like Your Majesty, that a man who rises from the ranks is worthy of all honor. Besides, I myself would seem a serf to some of your great nobles. Why should I look down on any one else as low-born?"

"Well, a German pastor ranks higher than a Russian pope, so much above a baker's boy. I learnt that on my travels. But my oldest families are like Menschikoff, you know. I beat them all alike, and they don't complain."

Ostermann did not smile. He was too wise to show any sign of amusement. He answered gravely:

"I am in His Majesty's power, as are all his

servants. He can strike if he has no further use for me."

"Do you dare to threaten me, you insolent scoundrel?"

Peter's voice was more friendly. The harsh words sounded almost like a compliment.

"I understand that His Majesty was threatening me."

"And you care nothing for life?"

Ostermann shrugged his shoulders.

"I like work; but I would never serve a man who struck me; and if I could not serve Peter Alexievitch I would not serve any one else. I am too old to begin afresh."

The Tzar's face cleared. He laid aside his stick, and grasped his Minister's hand.

"Nonsense, Andrei! Old? Why, I was young at thirty-eight!"

"Your Majesty has the gift of eternal youth."

Peter smiled.

"Perhaps I have; though my poor body is wearing out, I often feel as young as ever. I pray God to take me before I am too old to work for my country and find pleasure in life."

"May that be far distant!"

There was a ring of sincerity in the Vice-Chancellor's voice which touched his master.

"You are a queer fellow, Andreyushka! You will neither take a blow nor a bribe. You never

give way to me except when it suits you, yet I believe you are the most faithful friend I have."

"Possibly, Sire. Those you beat may be more humble, but each man works best in his own way, and I don't need the stick to quicken my zeal. Now may I be permitted to inquire what is my offense? Or, if it be already pardoned, shall we proceed to business?"

"Ah! You know your crime well enough. If we discussed it, I should get angry again; and that would do no good; for you are never penitent, and I can't punish you. You always think yourself in the right, whatever you do; and you prove it, too, in the end, worse luck! You would be more human if you were sometimes wrong, my 'Oracle'!"

It was evident that the Tzar's temper was quite restored now, so Ostermann went on to describe the interview with the Marquis de la Chêtardie.

"Is that all?" Peter asked, when he finished.

"Yes, Sire."

"You lie!"

The Vice-Chancellor flushed. Then he asked quietly:

"May I be allowed to inquire what His Majesty means?"

"I say, 'you lie.' I demanded a full report, and you tell me half, pretending that is all."

"His Majesty knows everything which concerned Russia."

"Not from you, Andrei Ivanovitch. All that touches you and your honor concerns me, yet you hide from me the fact that he offered you a bribe."

The Vice-Chancellor bit his lip. So his master did not trust him, after all these years of faithful service! He set a spy to report upon his interviews with foreign agents.

"I was sure he would," Peter went on, unconscious of the effect of his words. "You see, Monsieur Campredon knows it is of no use, and so do all who have been here long enough to form a sound judgment; but a vain young coxcomb like that would listen to nobody. He was certain to come to grief with you. I wish I could have seen his face when you made him pick up his dirty dross!"

The Tzar chuckled over the remembrance of the dialogue. His spy had not seen much, only heard everything, from his safe hiding-place.

"Sit down, Andrei. You look tired to-day. What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"It is only the heat, Sire."

"No, it's more than that. You are overworking. Oh! I know that you care for nothing else. You won't drink, you don't gamble, you never amuse yourself like the rest of us."

"I am a poor man."

"And an honest one! Do you think I don't value that? Did I seem to take the story of the little scene yesterday too lightly? If you knew how proud I was of you when I heard it. 'Ah!' said I, 'there is one true man I can always count on among my fellow-workers.' It is not ingratitude which keeps me from giving you a suitable reward. Money cannot pay a man like you; and Russia is so poor. I dare not add to her burdens. The long struggle to win a place among the nations of Europe, the cost of the navy, the necessity for reform everywhere—all that cripples her, and I cannot raise fresh taxes."

"I have asked nothing, Sire!" Ostermann threw in.

"You never do, but you deserve more than I can give. It is thanks to you that the country is respected abroad. You made the treaty with Sweden which gives her peace. You maintain her honor now in the eyes of the crafty, scheming diplomatists who prowl about us like wolves round a village, eager to snatch something from the weak and helpless. My people are children, little brother; but they have a great future. I shall not live to see them full-grown men; you must watch over them when I am gone. You will not desert them?"

"Never. But why talk of that, Sire? You will not leave them for many long years yet."

"I don't know. Sometimes it seems to me that my task is nearly done. It needed a strong instrument to roughly hew the block out of which the statue was to come. Now the idea of Russia has taken shape, and finer tools are wanted to finish the work."

Peter fell into a silent mood, gazing out over the sunlit water flowing between the islands on which he had built his capital. The sea was not far off, the pretty fleet of pleasure-boats at anchor in the river could sail down to the harbor of Cronstadt by the evening, if he gave the word. There were ships of all nations, laden with the priceless gifts of civilization; and it was his will which had brought them. He had transplanted Russia from Asia to Europe. He had forced her roots deep into the new soil. She was beginning to grow now; she would soon flourish, over-luxuriantly he feared, and need the pruning of a wiser gardener. Yes, his work was done. He felt that the end was drawing near. He had lived hard, and never spared himself either in work or play. Now he must pay the penalty.

But what would become of Russia when he was gone? He did not fear for her remote future. It was the immediate present that troubled him. Was Catherine strong enough to rule wisely? He had just crowned her Empress at Moscow, but already he felt doubtful of her capacity. She

was a woman, and had been a peasant: was she fit to rule? And, after her, what then? His grandson, Peter, was a boy. It was too soon to guess whether he would grow up a man or a driveling, incompetent, cowardly fool like his father. A wave of anger swept through the Tzar's mind as he thought of the son he had despised, hated, put out of the way. Little Peter was that creature's child. Would he be as foolish, as unstable, as opposed to carrying on the great work of civilizing Russia? Who would teach him to put duty before pleasure, his country's good above his own personal wishes?

There was only one man Peter knew he could trust; only one man in Russia who saw things as he did, who could rouse the boy to work, who would instil some sense of patriotism into his mind. That man was an alien, a German; but he was Ostermann. The Tzar relied more firmly on his Minister than on himself. He was carried away by gusts of passion, Ostermann never swerved from the cause he had marked out. Peter's eyes came back from regarding the restless water, and gravely studied the Vice-Chancellor's face.

"You ought to marry," he said abruptly.

"I would rather not," the other replied, puzzled but decided.

"Ah, but you must! You need some one to

take care of you. You work too hard. You look pale, delicate, worn out. Marriage is the cure for all your ills. There is no nurse like a good wife. Katia has saved my life many times over."

"I am grateful for His Majesty's consideration; but I do not care for women. It would annoy me to have one always about."

"Nonsense, my friend. For a wise man that is a very foolish speech. Why did the good God make women unless they were to be useful to us? Besides, you must have money: you don't complain, but your salary is too small; and a rich woman would provide all you need. Let me see, there is Vorontzoff's widow. How would she do?"

Ostermann laughed.

"Excellently, if you desire to shorten my life. She has killed one husband already, so she is in good practice."

"Well, if you don't like widows, there is the daughter of Boris Golitzin."

"I am a defenseless man, Sire. An army might cope with such a virago, not I."

"Come, she is a handsome creature, and will have a large dowry."

"Yes, she answers to a description I read once: 'She has more hair than wits, more faults than hairs, and more wealth than faults.' I pray you

to excuse me from undertaking the management of such a wife."

"You are too hard to please, Andrei Ivanovitch. It seems to me a loyal subject would take what his sovereign offered."

"Pardon, Sire. I may have no right to choose a wife; but surely I am free to refuse one."

"I never said you might not choose one. It was you who spoke as if you knew too little of women to be able to make a choice."

Peter waited a moment for an answer, then asked impatiently:

"Well, can you suggest any one?"

"If you will give me time. The idea of marriage is new to me. Will Your Majesty graciously allow me a few days to consider?"

"A few days! What a wily fox you are! If I gave you a few days I might forget, and you would never remind me. No! Don't protest. It is not the first time you have made delay serve you. Before, you may have been in the right: the interests of Russia were at stake, and it is not well to decide great questions in a hurry. Now, it is different. I will take no excuse. You must make up your mind."

Ostermann's face looked so blank that Peter laughed.

"On my soul! You are more afraid of a wife than you are of my stick. Come! I will give you

a few minutes—as long as I take to write this letter."

He turned to the table and began. His pen was never rapid; to-day he paused frequently; either to scratch his head as he wondered how a word was spelt, or to cast an amused glance over his shoulder at his sorely perplexed Vice-Chancellor.

Ostermann had a very difficult problem to consider. He guessed that Peter's chief object was to find a way to bind him irrevocably to the Russian service. He did not wish to leave it, as a matter of fact, but that was a point he could not hope to prove. The idea, then, being connected in his master's mind with the future of the State, would not be abandoned. No delay would be granted. The thing must be faced. Well, if marriage were inevitable, it would be well to discover its compensations. Peter required that the bride should be rich. Her money would save her husband from the repetition of an insult like the one that had stirred his wrath yesterday. His honesty would seem more credible if he were too wealthy to be easily bought.

But the woman! There was the drawback. He was fastidious by nature, and the surface knowledge he possessed of the Court ladies was little to his taste. Could he endure to be bound to one of them for life? His thoughts wandered

to a lively, black-eyed French woman, dainty alike in person and wit. She had fascinated his imagination; but she was out of the question now. There were two objections to Madame Desanges. No one knew if her husband, supposing her to have had one at all, were alive or dead; and though that obstacle might have been overcome, worse remained. She was a foreigner, and Peter wished his Minister's wife to be a Russian. Ostermann sighed. His mind was almost a blank where women were concerned. He could think of no one else.

The scratching of the pen ceased. Peter turned, holding up his letter.

"I have finished, Andreyushka. Are you ready?"

"You have not sealed or addressed it," urged the Minister.

"Well, I grant you two minutes more."

The Vice-Chancellor watched idly as his master produced his tinder-box from a drawer in the writing-table, struck the flint and steel sharply together, and lit a taper. Then, with his wonted care about details, Peter replaced the box, locking the drawer. The noise of the key in the wards, the click of the lock, brought back to the mind of the harassed looker-on the scene of yesterday's banquet.

He thought of the girl's face with a passing

pity, sparing her a moment from the consideration of his own difficulties. Poor child! What would become of her at Court? Who would protect her amid its dangers? He had saved her once, but she needed some one always ready to guard her from the perils which surrounded her. He knew what the men were. She would win more respect among savages than among these half-civilized brutes who aped the vices of their European neighbors. As for the women, they would have no pity for a girl who set up a higher standard than their own.

Suddenly the solution of the difficulties flashed upon him. He must choose a wife, she needed a husband. Why should he not come to her aid once more? She was too young to give trouble. He could mold her as easily as the Tzar's seal impressed its stamp on the melted wax. She was a Russian of the Russians, something of an heiress, too, he had learnt by his cautious inquiries yesterday; in both particulars she would fulfil Peter's requirements.

The pen spluttered over the final stroke, and the writer turned once more.

"Well?"

"May I be permitted to ask for the hand of the Princess Marfa Ivanovna Streschnieva?"

The Tzar frowned.

"She is my cousin."

"But a distant one," argued the Minister.

Peter glanced at him sharply, but read nothing in his face.

Ostermann went on: "If not, I respectfully plead to be allowed to remain a bachelor."

"Do you mean that you will not marry any one else?"

"Have I not said so?"

Ostermann generally meant what he said, and he would evidently welcome any excuse to escape marriage.

"When have you spoken to her?"

"Never."

"Then why did you help her yesterday?"

"I?"

"Yes, you."

Ostermann pretended to be lost in surprise. He wondered what would be the best move to make. He did not wish to marry, but he disliked being beaten in any game he chose to play; and, after all, the girl's money would be useful to him. He looked up as if he had guessed the answer to a riddle.

"Was it Princess Marfa who ran past me when I was obliged to retire from the banquet?"

"You know it was."

"I could not be sure. She ran so fast that I had hardly time to see her face. Surely Your Majesty does not hold me responsible for that?

Was it my fault if she chose to take advantage of the open door?"

"If you did not have it opened on purpose, if you have never spoken to her, why do you wish to marry her?"

"Possibly for that very reason. I have less objection to a stranger of whom I know nothing than to ladies whose fame is too well established."

"Have your own way, then. Marry her tomorrow, if you like."

"I ask your forgiveness, but by your own law a few weeks must elapse between the betrothal and the wedding."

Peter laughed good-humoredly.

"You are anxious to gain time, little brother!"

"No criminal sentenced to death desires to hasten the fatal hour. Besides, the lady should be consulted. She might refuse."

"You are incorrigible!"

"Thanks to Your Majesty's forbearance in sparing me correction."

CHAPTER IV

The Reel's Reward

THERE was a dance that evening at the Post Office, which Ostermann attended by order of the Tzar. Peter never wasted time in beginning a scheme on which he had set his heart. He was also anxious to see the first meeting between his Minister and the chosen bride. She could hardly avoid some sign of recognition if they had met before. But when the critical moment came, his thoughts were elsewhere.

Ostermann found his fellow guests drawn up with military precision in two long lines. Between them marched their host, bent on teaching the first steps of the minuet. Some may have known it already, but he never stopped to inquire. All must learn: for all were to take part in it. He would not allow any one to shirk. So backwards and forwards he went, pointing his toes while he made steps that would have filled the mind of a ballet-dancer with wonder. At the sight of his Foreign Minister he paused, pushing back his wig to mop his glistening forehead.

"Welcome, Andrei Ivanovitch! I was just

wishing that I had some one to help me. You are a German, so can dance enough to teach these lazy swine, who only care for vodka."

The Vice-Chancellor regretted the folly which had brought him here. If he had stayed at home, he could have spent the evening elaborating the new cipher; but this talk of marriage had unsettled him. Now this task struck him with dismay. He was quite sure that Nature had not intended him for a dancing-master.

"See!" the Tzar pursued, "I will drill the men; for I can beat them with my staff if they do not pay good heed. It is the women that I am afraid of. There are many foreigners present to-night, so all Europe would cackle if I lost my temper and struck any of the little minxes."

"His Majesty must pardon me," protested the Minister. "I cannot teach the ladies."

"Oh, that is nonsense, little brother! You are the only man in Russia who has never made a diplomatic blunder; it cannot be so hard for you to teach my golden beauties how to kick their pretty heels."

Ostermann smiled grimly. Compliments would not make it easier for him to achieve the impossible; and he was more afraid of the women than his master was—in every-day life. However, there was no help for it. Peter turned his back

on him, and was off once more down the long line of men, bowing, sliding, pirouetting. His whole heart was in his work, which was sober earnest to him, and part of his scheme of general reform. It was not enough to abolish the old system of the terem, where the women lived apart in oriental seclusion. They must be made to take their share in society, like their Western sisters. He had forced them to attend his banquets, but even he doubted if much were gained by that. Then he ordered them to give receptions, issuing minute regulations as to the number of guests to be invited, and the kind of entertainment to be provided. The accounts that reached him afterwards made him weep with rage. The women could not talk freely with the men. They had hardly an idea in common. All their training for centuries had made such assemblies seem to them monstrously indecent; so these parties were distinguished for dullness, or for hard drinking, when the less severe strove to drown their prejudices in vodka. Now, as a remedy for social evils, he had decreed that all the world should dance.

For a few seconds Ostermann stood still, contemplating with a sinking heart the row of faces opposite—some stupid, more defiant, a few mocking. It was the challenge thrown by a pair of bright black eyes that goaded him to action.

He had a sudden idea. Going down the line, he asked each in turn if she knew any steps. At first he met with sullen looks and a surly "No" for answer. But, half-way, he came to Madame Desanges.

"What shall I answer, Your Excellency? Surely it is bad manners for me to differ from these great ladies, yet I cannot say 'No' to you."

"Thanks, Madame. Will you leave the ranks, then? I must humbly ask your aid in this matter."

"So great a Minister has only to command."

"Not in modern Russia, where we wish to recognize the supremacy of women."

The older ladies pursed their lips and shook their heads; these foreign manners were not to their taste. But the effect on the girls was immediate. They did not choose to be thrown into the shade by this audacious French creature.

"Yes, Andrei Ivanovitch, I have learnt a little," said the next one asked; and she stepped forth accordingly.

Before the end of the row was reached, there was nearly a dozen helpers collected. Among them Ostermann recognized Princess Marfa. She showed no sign of remembering him, however, and took her place without a word of thanks or a smile. He was conscious of a momentary feeling of disappointment.

Eudoxia Borisovna, the daughter of one of the Galitzins, claimed the right to lead. She was a handsome girl, proud of her beauty, her birth, and her great wealth; yet some whispered she was eager to change her name, and furious that no one had asked her to do so. Her suitors, so far, were few and timid; for all the men knew, what Ostermann had pleaded that morning, that it would need a strong hand to tame such a shrew. Now she caught at an opportunity for showing herself superior to her neighbors.

Madame Desanges raised her fan to hide her smiles.

"Such grace! But, my friend, does it not remind you of the antics of a bear?"

Then she frowned; for Ostermann was not listening to her. His eyes were wandering to the little country girl who had lately come to Court. What could he see in her?

"Why are you not dancing, Andrei?" demanded a stern voice at his elbow.

Peter had crossed the room, suspecting wilful disobedience.

"I leave the task to abler feet, Sire. It is not suffering from that."

"Ah! you always show yourself wiser than I am, little brother! It is better to train others, as you do, than to attempt everything yourself, as I do."

The Tzar stood for a few minutes, leaning on his favorite's shoulder, while he watched the progress of the dancing-lesson. His wig was still further awry, and the hair beneath showed thin and gray on the temples. His eyes were bloodshot; and he seemed so spent with his exertions as to need the support the younger man gave.

"Thanks, my children, you have done enough," he said at last. "Now amuse yourselves. Each of you choose a partner, and dance your best, to show your mothers that it is better to do something well, which every one admires, than to be content with sitting in a corner, eating and drinking."

Ostermann expected that he would now be presented to his future bride; but Peter's mind was still busy with other ideas. When he seated himself in his great carved chair at the end of the room, he kept the Vice-Chancellor beside him.

Madame Desanges gave them a quick look, to make sure of her suspicions, and saw the Foreign Secretary's eyes turned towards Marfa.

"Very well, I can cure him of his interest in that baby face," she reflected.

Moving gracefully through the throng, she touched the girl's arm with her fan.

"You dance divinely, Princess! May I ask

you, out of charity, to show some kindness to a friend of mine?"

She was making a lame attempt to speak Russian, but she was answered in unexpectedly good French.

"Certainly, Madame. I shall be delighted to find a partner."

"Monsieur Lindsay, come here. Princess, may I present Monsieur Valtère Lindsay de—ah! I cannot remember the strange Scotch word. Does it matter, since I can hardly pronounce the beautiful Russian name of the Princess? What really signifies is that this gracious lady will give you a dance."

It flashed upon Marfa that the Frenchwoman was laughing at her. At once she was on her guard.

"Alas! Madame forgets that I know nothing but the dances of my own country: what we call a reel," Lindsay expostulated.

He had shown a want of humor yesterday in regard to the manners of the men. Those of the women pleased him less. In his country, a girl waited to be asked. Here, it was they who chose the partners.

"What does that matter?" asked the malicious little Frenchwoman. "The Princess is so marvelous a performer that she can easily learn your steps."

Marfa gave her a quick glance, and understood. Why this stranger should dislike her, she could not imagine, but the fact was evident.

"Madame is too flattering," she murmured, as if overcome by the compliment. "Indeed, I cannot do less than try to please her."

Lindsay bit his lip. He disliked making a fool of himself by standing up to dance the reel with a Russian girl who ought still to be in the nursery.

"The music is not suitable," he pleaded desperately. A man had to yield something out of politeness to women; but he might escape thus.

"That is nothing," returned Madame eagerly. "One of the fiddlers is of your nation, and he shall play what you will."

She laughed softly to herself as she made her way to the musicians. "She will fail and look absurd. I know! I have seen a 'rille.'"

Marfa turned to Lindsay with sparkling eyes and a curious smile playing about her lips.

"We cannot disappoint your kind friend, Monsieur. She has taken so much trouble to give you pleasure."

Lindsay's embarrassment deepened. He could not be churlish to this pretty child, and he owed something, as she said, to Madame Desanges. Well! he would make the best of a bad job.

Madame flitted here and there, busied with

her little scheme for curing Ostermann's infatuation. From the band she went to the Tzar, and from him to the Master of Ceremonies. In a few minutes a stentorian voice was heard above the noise, the music stopped, every one waited, expectant.

"His most excellent and Tzarish Majesty commands Monsieur Valtère Lindsay," the name was repeated as given by Madame Desanges, "to perform a Scotch dance. Princess Marfa Ivanovna Streschnieva will be his partner."

At once all eyes were turned towards the pair, who came forward somewhat gravely to give proof of their skill in the lightest of arts. The company divided automatically into two rows, but this time some of the younger women kept their partners by their side; earning thereby the approval of their sovereign, and the censure of their sex—two objects equally worth gaining.

Ostermann watched with something like anxiety. It appeared hopeless for a Russian girl from the country to attempt a complicated foreign dance. She could never have even seen it before. He disliked the thought of his future wife making a fool of herself before the whole Court; but Peter was deaf to his murmured remonstrance. Madame Desanges had gained permission for the performance without mentioning the names of the performers, and now that

the public announcement had been made it was too late to interfere.

Marfa stepped bravely into the middle of the room, looking very different from the horror-stricken girl of the day before. She held her head high, and her eyes sparkled with mischievous delight as she saw her partner's growing melancholy. Curtseying to the ground before the Tzar, smiling in answer to the Tzaritza's troubled gaze, she turned to Lindsay.

"Show me the steps, please."

"I can't. It is no use."

"You must, or the Emperor will be angry."

"Well, there! Point your toes like this. No, confound it, not like that! So! Now do you understand?"

For a minute or two the girl boggled over her task. Then, as Lindsay lost patience, she laughed.

"Never mind! I dare say you can't teach me. Let us try to do it without."

"It is impossible," he muttered savagely.

She leant forward and whispered something. In a moment his face changed, his eyes brightened, the reel began.

Ostermann's fear gave place to a thrill of pride. The girl was wonderful. He had reason to congratulate himself on his choice. Had any one ever seen such dancing before in Russia? She

moved as lightly as a leaf drifting in an eddying breeze. He had never seen a woman more fairy-like. Surely she hovered over the ground on wings! No human feet could bear her along so easily.

At the end came a great roar of applause. The men were wild with enthusiasm. The women—all save a dark-eyed foreigner—forgot their envy in a burst of generous admiration. Old Princess Dolgorouki expressed the general sentiment when she exclaimed, embracing the girl with genuine fervor:

"Well done, Marfa Ivanovna! A thousand thanks, my golden beauty, for showing that Russians can dance better than any one else when they know how!"

Then others crowded round, questioning, admiring, congratulating; until into the midst of the throng strode Peter, scattering them as a whale might scatter a shoal of herring. He caught the dancer in his arms, kissed her on both cheeks, and thanked her as warmly as the old lady had.

"Now I will reward you, my little one. You shall receive the highest honor I have in my power to bestow."

Catherine, who was following more slowly, to add her voice to the chorus of praise, paused an instant and grew pale. No one could foresee

where Peter's impulses might not carry him. Marfa belonged to an old boyar family. This scene might mean either ruin or the Crown for her. A convent had received Peter's first wife. Would her successor share her fate? Yet, in spite of her terror, Catherine came forward with a smile on her round, good-natured face.

"May I, too, thank you, my child, for making Russia great before the eyes of envious foreigners?"

Peter nodded approval.

"Quite right, my heart's friend! Give her a kiss; but be quick, for she must have her prize. Come here, Andrei Ivanovitch! I must present you to your future wife. Marfa Ivanovna, I am going to give you a good husband; and this is the best gift a woman can have. Eh? my little Katia?"

Catherine agreed warmly, and kissed her Maid of Honor with increased cordiality. Then Ostermann took Marfa's hand, and bowed over it, just touching it with his lips. She met his eyes for a moment with something of the startled appeal that had touched him before; and suddenly there sprang up in his heart a tender feeling for this child whose future lay in his hands. He swore to himself that he would do his utmost to render that future happy, and to protect her from all the evils of life.

He was a German, after all, and far more capable of sentiment than he had supposed. That night he dreamed, and his dreams were of the new estate he was about to enter by order of the Tzar. Through the fair country of his visions floated the figure of a laughing, dancing child, whose name was Marfa.

CHAPTER V

Seven Years Ago

MARFA was ten, and had run wild since her birth. She had never seen her father, her mother died when she was born, her brothers were all she wanted in the way of family and friends. They lived on a great property near Kieff, surrounded by far-stretching forests. The serfs worshiped them. Children rule lightly, though imperiously. They frowned or smiled, seldom ordered the knout, never dreamed of the gallows. Vladimir was fourteen then, and Pavel twelve.

They were coming back from a bear-hunt, and quarreling as to who should claim the honors of the day.

"I found him first," asserted Marfa. "I saw the thin jet of warm breath rising up through the tiny hole it makes in the snow, and I said, 'Look! There's a bear!' "

The brothers stopped their wrangling to join in crushing her.

"Nonsense, Marfa! What does it matter what you saw? You are going to be a woman, and that is worse than being a serf!"

"I am not a woman yet, anyway, and I will speak," she shouted; for Vladimir had clapped his hand over her mouth to stop her.

"Let her alone," Pavel interceded. "She can't help being a girl. You might let her enjoy herself now."

In a free fight Marfa would get much the worst of it, and he felt that it was not fair to her that Vladimir should use his superior strength.

"I will punish her when we get home," he added, to set the matter right.

"You!" they answered angrily in one breath.

"I am the eldest," Vladimir went on. "I am master here, and I will beat you till you know it."

"Anyway, I could knock you down as easily as you could me," supplied Marfa. "I'll soon show you that I am just as strong as you are."

"Oh, I dare say!" sneered the eldest brother, turning on her with renewed contempt. "You will blacken his eyes, and then cry your own out with remorse, as you did last time. What fools girls are!"

"If I let you thrash me," Pavel interrupted, "will you leave Marfa's punishment in my hands? After all, a great boyar doesn't chastise his serfs himself."

Vladimir reflected.

"Very well, you shall be executioner if you

like; but I will fight you first to teach you that I am master."

"I see a sledge," Marfa shrieked excitedly.

"A sledge! Why, we are in one."

"I don't mean this. Look ahead!"

Far away, in the distance, something moved. Vladimir was inclined to doubt its being what his sister said. How could there be a sledge there without their knowledge? The serfs they did not require for the hunt were asleep on their stoves in this cold weather. Then a faint sound floated to them through the still air—the jangle of harness-bells.

"She is right," said Pavel. "It's a traveling sledge, and it is going to our house."

Such a thing had hardly ever been known to happen before. Certainly ten-year-old Marfa could not remember anything like it. Vladimir lashed the horses, which broke into a wild gallop, and they reached home almost as soon as the stranger. That was the most surprising moment in their lives. For on the steps stood a tall, slightly built woman, who looked to their startled eyes like the princess in a fairy tale. The dark furs in which she was enveloped set off her brilliantly fair complexion; her eyes were the color of a clear wintry sky with starry sparkles; from under her close-fitting hood escaped two little red-gold rings of hair, crisp with the frost.

Vladimir sprang from the sledge to meet her. "Welcome, fairest of Tzar's daughters!" he meant to say, but his tongue failed him.

Before this dazzling apparition, he was dumb and loutish as a serf. She spoke first.

"How do you do, Vladimir Ivanovitch? Is this Pavel?"

She held out her hand, smiling. Pavel kissed the thick fur glove devoutly, as though it held an icon. Marfa stared in growing wonder. This stranger was only a woman, after all. There were no fairy princesses now.

"I will excuse you from taking off your caps to me out here in the cold; but, indoors, I must teach you to bow. Your father wishes you to join him in the spring, and he will take you with him to France. You must learn fine Court manners first; for it would never do for a Russian prince to be ignorant of the ways of a gentleman."

Her sweet voice, with its slight touch of a foreign accent, made the words palatable to the boys; but Marfa scowled. Who was this woman who presumed to speak so to her brothers?

"You have not said 'how do you do' yet, little Marfa. Come here and kiss me; for we must be friends. Your father has sent me to live with you while your brothers are away, so that you need not be dull."

"I don't want you," the child returned, de-

fiantly. "I won't let Pavel and Vladimir go away without me; and if they do, I don't want you. I have my old Sonia; and I can kill bears and wolves in the forest."

"Hold your tongue, you little fool!" Vladimir commanded.

"Hush!" said the stranger. "No gentleman speaks like that to any woman, even to his sister. Marfa and I will become good friends by and by. Meantime, I shall rely on you, Vladimir Ivanovitch, to help me. I know I shall not count on you in vain."

She gave him a dazzling smile which made him forget the sting of her reproof. Then, as the huntsmen came up and he showed the result of the day's sport, her eager interest charmed him still more. She treated him almost as though he were a man, and, indeed, his size made him look older than he really was. Her admiration of their courage and skill touched the children's pride. Even Marfa forgot her enmity to this most sympathetic of listeners, as she joined her brothers in describing the exciting incidents of the hunt.

"It was I who jumped into the hole and struck him on the nose," Pavel said eagerly; and his sister explained:

"That is what really kills them. They are never dangerous afterwards."

Vladimir was about to protest, but he suddenly grew aware that if he fought with his brother and sister over such a trifle, he would sink in the opinion of this lovely, clear-eyed woman.

That night Sonia wept with rage at the spell the foreign witch had cast over her children.

"Ah! it breaks my heart to lose my white doves; but they will suffer less than you, my golden beauty. They will ride out into the world like princes, and all men will bow low before the fair sun, Vladimir, and my great soul, Pavel. But you, my poor motherless Marfiushka, what will become of you? You will be kept cooped up all day like a bird in a cage, and you will weep your eyes red over the cruel needlework."

"No, I won't!" interrupted the child. "I would order the serfs to beat her and lock her up in a cellar if she tried to make me do what I didn't want to do. But I don't believe she is as bad as you say. She told Vladimir that a man should bow before a woman as he does before the Tzar. She says that the Emperor of France, the country they are to go to, takes off his hat if he passes a maid from the kitchen."

"What does it matter, little angel, how foolish men may be in other countries? The old Russian manners are good enough for a Russian prince."

But Marfa was silent. In her heart she was

thinking that it might not be such a terrible thing to have been born a woman. Perhaps, after all, she might rank higher than a serf when she grew up.

"And she is a foreigner, my pet. She is not a Christian!"

Marfa mechanically turned to the icon and crossed herself. Perhaps Sonia was right, and the stranger was a witch. But the next morning Vladimir laughed at her fears. Witches could not face the light of dawn, he assured her; and neither she nor Pavel could remember anything to the contrary in the old legends and fairy tales, which were their only source of knowledge.

The day proved stormy. Snow fell heavily. No one could go out; and the children were glad to have so delightful a companion, who checked their quarrels, told them enchanting stories of the mysterious world outside, and invented a dozen ways of amusing them.

"How cold your hands are!" she exclaimed as Marfa clutched her eagerly, in the middle of a tale of wild adventure. She said no more, however, until she finished the story; then she rose.

"Let us dance to warm ourselves," she proposed.

Vladimir blushed, and said nothing. Pavel fidgeted. Marfa spoke out.

"What is dancing?" she asked.

"Oh! it is a way of moving about that makes

one feel nice and hot," Christian Gordon answered, without a sign of surprise. "Shall I teach you?"

"Do they do it in France?" inquired Vladimir cautiously.

"Yes, every night almost, at Court."

"Very well," said Pavel, resigned.

"It would be very kind of you," Vladimir supplied.

He had learnt to speak politely to a lady already; and he had practised the bow she had taught him last night when the younger ones were in bed.

"Wait two minutes, then, while I fetch my fiddle."

She ran out of the room, and the children exchanged glances.

"What a lot she knows!" observed Vladimir.

"I wonder what a fiddle is!" Marfa murmured. Neither brother ventured on an explanation. In a few minutes their new friend returned, bringing with her a stringed instrument, different from the balalaika on which they could all strum accompaniments to the songs they had learnt from the serfs. This was rather more elaborate than the usual type of violin; for the body of it was decorated with a picture of Brescia, and the neck ended in a carved head. Mistress Christian played a few bars, and each note went to the very soul of the music-loving children. The

sound reached the servants, who soon crowded unceremoniously into the room.

"You must tell them to go," said the player with decision. "No one could learn to dance in a room full of people."

Vladimir, in his zeal to obey, carried out her instructions with unnecessary vigor. He drove them out, not only with curses, but with a whip. His new friend looked on wonderingly. These hulking giants cowered before the boy's anger, and scuttled out like timid sheep. No Highland peasant would have borne such words even from a chief; a blow would have roused an uncontrollable fury in him. From that time Christian Gordon despised the Russian serf as a wholly contemptible animal. His gentleness and patience were cowardice in her eyes, and to her, courage was the one thing needful.

That day Marfa learnt the reel, and practised it and other dances diligently while her brothers remained at home. It was the beginning of her education. French was the next step. Christian Gordon spoke to Vladimir that evening.

"I want your help, prince."

"You know that I am at your service. You have but to command."

She smiled on him, and he felt a glow of pride.

"This is a very serious matter. I do not want you to go to France as a dumb man. Is not

that what you call foreigners because they cannot speak your language?"

"Yes, but what can we do? No one here knows French. The pope has taught us to read and write—a little," he added honestly; "but even he knows nothing more."

"I will teach you if you will learn."

"Oh, gracious lady! How can I thank you?"

"By helping me. You want Pavel to learn, too?"

"Ye-es." The assent was very doubtful.

"And Marfa should not be left out, or she will be dull. Besides, it is not right for your sister to grow up like an ignorant serf. I would not have you feel ashamed of her when you come back from foreign lands. So I am anxious to teach her all that a lady should know. It will be hard for her at first; for she has learnt nothing except outdoor sports; but Russians are apt pupils, and there is plenty of time. I want you to make the beginning easy for her."

"How kind you are!"

"And you will help me? I knew it. Well, now I will explain my idea. Suppose we do a little work regularly every morning—as you will do, by and by, with your tutors. We might begin with half an hour, and increase gradually, but we must do it steadily. We must not give it up because the weather is fine and we want

to go wolf-hunting, or because it is snowing and we feel sleepy. You must keep the others up to it, and see that they don't go to sleep behind the stove, or rush out on a sledge when we want them to work."

Vladimir nodded. His enthusiasm sank somewhat at the idea of regular work; but his new friend reminded him that in his father's absence he was the head of the house, the acting Prince Streschnieff.

CHAPTER VI

The Fate of Christian Gordon

SO Marfa learnt many things, both good and evil, from her Scotch teacher. She was already bold and active about outdoor sports, but she grew ashamed of being idle indoors. She learnt the pleasure that books can give, and realized the greatness of the world beyond the forest. She worked hard at her singing, and learnt how to get from the balalaika all the music it could give. In Mistress Christian's hands it was a different instrument from what it was under the unskilful touch of the peasant's.

But Marfa learnt much that was evil, too; for her companion despised the serfs, and used them to point morals. Marfa must not do what was wrong, because the peasants did it. She must not resemble them in any way. So, as she adored Mistress Christian, she forgot the kindly patriarchal tradition, and the christianin became moujiks; the souls, mere slaves.

When she was fifteen, her mother's sister, Tatiana Gregorievna, came to live with her. She was a violent reactionary, a friend of the Grand-

duchess Maria Alexievna, and a secret supporter of the divorced Empress and her worthless son Alexis. Some sort of conspiracy there was to dethrone Peter. Alexis died. His supporters were executed, sent to Siberia, or shut up in convents. Nothing could be proved against Tatiana Gregorievna, and she was released after five years of compulsory meditation under the rule of an abbess who regarded her as a martyr to a holy cause.

Once free, she found a refuge on her brother-in-law's property. Finding she could not make her niece quarrel with her governess, she changed her tactics and accepted the inevitable.

"How I envy those of your nation, Sudarinia! You grow up free and brave among a generous, chivalrous people. Would that the child of my beloved sister were destined to such happiness! Alas! I know the Court too well to cherish any hopes for her!"

She then proceeded to relate all she had seen and heard to the discredit of Peter and his courtiers. Some of it her listener knew to be true. She had spent some months in the capital before coming here. Lately the one serf she trusted, Ivan Popovitch, had returned from taking a message to his master, and his account confirmed Mistress Christian's worst suspicions. Marfa was little likely to get any good through her

father; and the aunt was too reactionary to help her with sound advice, even if she had any chance of being near her when the moment of trial came.

After that the worst vices were attributed to the serfs, that Marfa might take warning by them. The girl hardly understood what was said then; but when she was at Court she remembered. Those who showed themselves most shameless in evil-doing were peasants by birth, like Menschikoff, Demidoff, and the majority of the Tzar's favorites. The great nobles, like the Dolgoroukis and Galitzins, were quicker in acquiring an outward refinement which veiled their wickedness from Marfa's eyes. Mistress Christian had told her that such things were not done by the descendants of Rurik, and she had cause, at first, to believe the dogma was true.

The autumn before the girl was seventeen, her father fell into disgrace, and was sent to live on his estate. He was a coarse, evil-looking man; but his manners towards Marfa and her governess were good. Aunt Tatiana avoided him altogether; and she kept her niece with her as much as possible. He was busy with his plans for reforming his property. If he forced new habits and customs on his people, he could earn the Tzar's favor again. He

hated the country, and longed to be back among the pleasures of Saint Petersburg. His serfs still wore Eastern kaftans and flowing beards. That must be altered at once. There was a short struggle over the clothes, but the peasants yielded. He was their master and might command them in everything. Then he ordered them to shave.

"Most gracious Prince, pardon us! Take all that we have, beat us, kill us if you will, but do not destroy our souls."

"Your souls!" he sneered in answer to this humble remonstrance. "Nonsense! I order, and you must obey."

They groveled before him; but they would not shave.

"How can we reach heaven if we have thrown away the gifts of the good God? Saint Peter will say, 'Are ye women, ye beardless creatures?' and when we confess that we are men, he will send us away into everlasting torment."

Ivan Streschnieff laughed mockingly. He had heard of this strange superstition before, and he despised it. All he wanted was to win his master's pardon. He would go back to Saint Petersburg.

"I have ordered, and you must obey," he reiterated.

The serfs cringed lower, but would not shave.

"Send your pope here!" thundered their master, and the old priest came.

He was weak of body, accustomed to reverence his superiors, eager for peace; but he was a Russian and a peasant. A beard was sacred in his eyes. The prince tried threats, arguments, more threats, then blows. The old man did not yield. Finally the great noble lost patience. It was unheard-of insolence, and he must make an example to terrify the village. With his own hands he shaved the priest, and the peasants watched, pale, motionless, full of unspeakable horror at the sacrilege.

That night the soul of Ivan Pavlovitch went to its own place.

Marfa never knew how her father died; she only took part with wondering interest in all the ceremonies of the funeral. She headed the long procession which passed him as he lay in state in the great hall. Each in turn kissed his cheek or his hand, each murmured a prayer, and Mistress Christian watched with set lips. Last of all, came the feeble old man, who had been his victim and the cause of his murder. It was the custom for the priest to put a paper in the dead man's hand, a kind of passport to the better world. No one ever knew the contents of that given to Ivan Pavlovitch, but

those who saw the old pope's face doubted its being a recommendation to Saint Peter. After all, his children, the peasants, had to be excused for their crime. The blame must be laid on another soul.

Christian Gordon's contempt deepened.

The winter passed slowly. Marfa felt that some new element of lurking evil had been introduced into their quiet lives, but she could not guess its nature. When the roads were hard enough to travel, Ivan Popovitch was sent to take the news of his master's death to the young princes. He got as far as Saint Petersburg, and returned with a message that the Tzar had ordered both the sons of the dead man to continue their foreign studies for a few more years; and he added that some one would be sent during the summer to take away the young princess. She was to be given a place at Court. Then Christian Gordon wrote an urgent letter to one of her countrymen in the Russian service.

The weeks dragged by. Marfa noticed that a weight of care seemed to have fallen on her usually gay companion.

"What is it, my little mother?" she asked in her own language. Tender words and affectionate diminutives seemed to belong solely to that tongue. She knew none in French or Scotch.

"I will tell you to-morrow, Marfa. You will be seventeen then, and it is right that you should know."

Old Sonia, creeping past the window, paused to listen, but heard no more.

"What is that foreign devil going to tell her?" she wondered; and the suspicion of the truth made her mad with rage. "She shall not tell her that, the poisonous witch! I would kill her first with my own hands."

But she crept off to talk it over with her cronies in the village. Christian felt a sudden shuddering thrill run through her, and, picking up her violin, began to play as she had not done for years. Marfa had only heard the gayest of dance-music from the magic strings; now they sobbed and wailed with passionate Highland laments. It was unlike anything she had ever listened to before. Russian songs were plaintive, but resigned; mournful as those who have never hoped, and so meet a long-foreseen fate without a murmur. Only when they strove to be gay, there crept in an almost alien note of defiance. This music was different. It told of coming evil with the challenging note of the storm-wind. There was resistance, clamorous opposition, passionate protest in the tones. Then it changed. The sound of strife was gone, lost in the loud de-

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light of coming victory. From a coronach wailing over the dead, reviling fate, it became a pibroch speaking of battle indeed, but also of certain triumph.

"Ah! What wonderful things you play!" Marfa exclaimed.

Christian laid aside her instrument.

"I am fey to-day, child. I feel the coming of evil. We shall soon be parted, and my heart is sore for you. How will you struggle through the world alone? Life is hard for all of us, and what help is there for you?"

The girl stared at the speaker in silent surprise. Had she forgotten that she was talking to a princess, the owner of wide lands and many serfs? Aunt Tatiana had done much to revive Marfa's early sense of importance; Mistress Christian had taught her that it was no shame to be a woman, and that family pride was almost a virtue. This new language was utterly strange to her. She could not understand it.

"For myself," Christian pursued, "I am not loath to go. There are those I hope to see soon from whom I have been parted a weary time; but for you—I tremble when I think of your future."

"Do not talk so much of leaving me, little mother!" Marfa said, throwing her arms around her companion's neck. "I hate the idea of going

to Court; but, after all, you may be allowed to stay with me even there. You don't want to go back to Scotland at once?"

"Ah! It is not to Scotland I shall be going. I shall never see its bonny purple hills again, nor hear the kindly word spoken by mortal lips. I shall lie deep under Russian snows, in this strange land, among this strange people."

She spoke as if in a dream. Her eyes had a far-away look. She did not seem to see the girl who was so close to her. Once her lips murmured a name, "Ludovic!" and she smiled as Marfa had never seen her smile before. After a while she roused herself with an effort.

"I wish I could warn you of all the dangers before you, but I am not permitted to see your future, only my own. Your way seems to lie through darkness and mist, yet at the end I saw a light. May God guide you, little Marfa!"

The girl watched her, awestruck. She had never heard her speak so solemnly before, never imagined that her brilliant, light-hearted friend could look so grave.

"You cannot trust your own countrymen. The serfs cringe low, but beware of their treachery. They strike suddenly and without warning. Your aunt cannot help you much; for she cannot go with you to Court. It is there that you must face worse perils than from a

pack of hungry wolves, or a bear in early spring-time. I do not know who will help you; but you may always try the Scotch. There are many who have a kindly feeling to the gay Gordons, so speak to them of me. My mother was a Scobell from Moscow. Her brother is called 'Skobeleff.' He might do you a good turn for my sake; and there is a Learmont, who is settled in Saint Petersburg. I mind me he had a pretty gift of verse-making. Then there are Hamiltons; some of them have changed the name to something more Russian, but Mary Hamilton is in waiting on the Empress. She is a light, thoughtless lassie, but good-hearted. Never follow her example, but you may always take her advice. There are kinsmen of my own, too, to whom I have commended you—General Gordon and Count Bruce. They will do what they can for you. And I heard through Ivan Popovitch that one of the lightsome Lindsays is in the service of the Tzar. If ever you meet him, speak to him of Christian Gordon of Glen-musk."

She was silent after that, and Marfa pondered over the new names. Her father had mentioned "Lermontieff"; he must be the same as the verse-making Learmont. Count Bruce, too, he had spoken of to Mistress Gordon in connection with a certain Ostermann; but what they were

she knew not. The idea of going to the new capital of her own country and looking for friends among the foreigners only, was displeasing to her national pride. Aunt Tatiana used every opportunity to rouse her niece to resent the alien yoke. She was too wise to say anything against Mistress Christian personally, but she talked much of the splendors of Moscow and the departed glories of other days. Russia had been free, national, orthodox. Now she was bowed beneath the burden of supporting avaricious strangers, who came solely to seek a fortune, and departed carrying away the wealth they had wrung out of the poor, overtaxed country. Worse still, they had set themselves to corrupt the faith, manners, and morals of the innocent, unsuspicious people who gave them shelter.

Marfa listened, shrank from hurting Mistress Christian's feelings by repeating what she heard, and gradually came to believe it. Her father had cursed the foreigner frequently while he lived. His sudden death, Sonia hinted, was due to poison sent from Saint Petersburg by a faithless foreign friend. Marfa decided that Mistress Christian was different from the rest, because her mother had been born in Russia, and her father had been there for a time. The influence of Holy Moscow had changed them, so that they were hardly Scotch at all, in her opinion.

"Marfa! If we had a war like that in Scotland, where could you hide? Do you think the tester of your bed would do?"

The girl looked up with a start. Her thoughts had been so nearly disloyal to her friend. Now she answered crossly:

"There could not be a war here."

"No, but there might be danger. There are brigands in the forest, I hear, and they might attempt to carry you off for the sake of getting ransom."

"Then my serfs would defend me."

"Ah! You must not trust them. They are treacherous and cruel, as all cowardly creatures are. Let us plan a hiding-place in case of a sudden alarm."

Marfa shrugged her shoulders. The game seemed to her so childish. Then she remembered how soon they might be parted, and gave way.

"If you threw open the window noisily they would imagine that you had made your escape that way. Then you would creep back barefoot, climb up these carved Dutch posts, and so gain the tester easily. There you could hide till help came."

"But where would it come from?" Marfa asked.

"I have sent Ivan Popovitch to Moscow to

ask for a well-armed escort. I thought the roads too dangerous for you to travel alone."

Marfa began to feel afraid. Her vague fears came back to her more strongly while she slept. They grew more tangible, more terrible. She dreamed something so horrible that she woke gasping for breath, and then she grew aware of stealthy footsteps passing through the house. Every now and then a board creaked under some heavy weight. At first she thought of wolves. Then she remembered the brigands. At that thought she sprang to her feet. Where were the servants who slept in the corridor? It was too late to rouse them, she must first warn her friend.

When she reached the door between the two rooms, she found it locked on the other side. As she shook it in her impatience, her friend's voice called to her in Scotch:

"God be with you, my child. Save yourself!"

Then she grew aware of angry voices. The brigands were there!

She must get help and save Mistress Christian. She ran to the door opening into the corridor. That, too, was fastened. There was another behind her bed, opening into the next room. That yielded, and she was free. She ran through the dark, empty room, reached

the door, and gained the passage at last. Through an unshuttered window fell a flood of silvery moonlight. It showed her a surging crowd of bearded, wild-eyed men. These must be brigands; and yet—No! They were the servants of the house and the serfs from the village. Praised be the saints! They were saved!

She ran on towards them, but as she ran a new fear knocked at her heart. Why was there no sound of a struggle? Where were the brigands they had come to fight? She pushed her way into the throng, and was carried on with it. All were going in the same direction, and their goal was Mistress Christian's room. She thrust aside those immediately in front, but the press was great. She could not make herself heard above the threatening growl which broke from the men. It was like the noise of wolves falling on their prey. Each man who recognized her gave place; but the minutes seemed like hours before she reached the front rank.

The crowd swayed suddenly. She caught one brief glimpse of the scene they had come to witness. Near the window stood Christian Gordon, half-dressed, but with her hair falling like a cloak to her knees. Very proud she looked, and undaunted,—her head held high, her clear blue eyes seeming to hold

the men in check. Then some one shouted something, a word of warning, perhaps, for he had seen the Princess at his side. The cry maddened Sonia. She saw her prey escaping: the hated witch whose spell made these savage serfs shrink back afraid. With a shriek of rage she sprang forward, armed with a hammer. One blow was enough. Christian Gordon fell to the ground a corpse.

Marfa burst through the front ranks, who gave way in passive submission. For a moment the girl bent over her dead friend, making sure of the horrible fact. She called her in passionate entreaty, kissed her unresponsive lips; then rose and turned like an avenging fury on the peasants. All her veneer of civilization vanished. She was the wild, uncontrolled savage of former days. Her eyes flamed, her breath came in gasps, broken by angry sobs. She cursed the serfs as Vladimir or her father might have done, but with the added fervor of a helpless woman.

The peasants fell back pale and terrified, slinking away at her command without an attempt at even justifying their crime. Christian Gordon need not have feared for her pupil's immediate future. She was safe among her own serfs. The men who had murdered her father and come to the execution of one who

was in their eyes only a foreign witch, would never harm the least hair on their young mistress's head: not even after the soldiers had come, and she had exacted vengeance on the village. They suffered everything in uncomplaining silence. They had done what they thought was their duty; she was doing hers. Why should there be ill-will between them?

But Marfa saw things in a different light. Never while she lived would she forget the scene of her friend's murder, and never would she forgive the murderers. She left her old home with her escort, vowing not to return.

CHAPTER VII

The Burden of the Double Crowns

MARFA thought of all these things as she lay in the dark with wide-open eyes the night after the dance. She slept little, and dreamed no rosy dreams. She had only been a few weeks at Court; it was less than a month altogether since Mistress Christian's murder; but she had seen and heard enough to make life appear in its darkest colors. She tried to hope the men and women she feared or despised were all peasants or foreigners: even so, the scenes she witnessed daily, as well as the tales she heard, filled her soul with loathing. She longed for a refuge from this horrible world into which she had plunged so suddenly; and she could not hope to find one. She was never alone. Another Maid of Honor shared her room, and added to her troubles. She lay very still now for fear of rousing her. If she woke, she would be either angry or ready to gossip. Anyway it was better to let her sleep.

The idea of marriage half attracted, half repelled Marfa. It would save her from some

of her worst terrors, yet the wives she knew were not good advocates for matrimony. They were slaves for the most part—mere serfs, as her brothers used to teach her all women were before Mistress Christian came. Their husbands beat them frequently. Well! Hers would not succeed if he tried to do that, Marfa assured herself, smiling in the dark as she felt her muscles. She could fight Pavel in old days on fairly equal terms, and this man did not look strong. She wondered vaguely who he was. The name hardly sounded Russian, yet it might be for all she knew. He was noble, anyway. Peter made his peasant favorites princes, not counts, she argued. Then her mind grew hazy with sleep, and she turned to the one bright spot in her Court life—the dance.

The days passed quickly after that. There was much to be done, and Marfa got so tired with standing to be fitted for her new dresses, in addition to all her Court duties, that she no longer stayed awake at night to think. What was the good of thought, since she could do nothing? She rarely saw Ostermann, and then only in the presence of others. Peter was content to have arranged that a bridegroom should know his future bride by sight. In old days she was heavily veiled, even at the altar; and a man often found his newly wedded

wife was either villainously ugly, or deformed; in some cases she proved to be an old woman. Then there were fierce family quarrels, and a too repulsive bride was sent into a convent. The Tzar had abolished that system, and so felt that reforms need go no further in that direction. If a man were satisfied with the looks of his betrothed, what else mattered?

Marfa asked no questions. She was too proud to wish to hear what her neighbors thought of Count Ostermann. If he were to be her husband, he must be above their evil tongues. At all events, she discouraged comment. The Empress offered well-meant advice, but Marfa's stony face and icy manner proved too much even for her. She broke off with a shrug.

"You must learn for yourself, child. After all, our experiences will be widely different. Andrei Ivanovitch is not the Tzar."

Marfa curtsied profoundly, but her smile was slightly insolent. She liked Catherine—who could help it? She was so kindly, cheery, sunny-tempered; yet she despised her as a low-born foreigner, in no sense the equal of a descendant of Rurik. Her morals were those of a serf, and she had only seen life from the point of view of a captive servant. The Tzar had made her his wife, but even he could not make her a great lady.

It was absurd, too, to compare Ostermann to Peter. There was a gulf between the two men as wide as that between themselves, thought Marfa. The Tzar had associated with peasants until his manners had become like theirs. The Vice-Chancellor's suave courtesy deepened the conviction in his future bride's mind that he was of high birth. Otherwise the impression he made on her was shadowy, compared with the loud-voiced, brutal people round him. She fancied that he was effeminate, she caught whispers of cowardice. Well, that might be an advantage to his wife. In any case, there was no use in thinking much about him now; she would know quite enough soon.

So the days passed until the moment when Marfa found herself standing by the side of Ostermann in the Cathedral, where they were being solemnly crowned by the Metropolitan Feofan Procopovitch, in presence of the Tzar and the whole Court. "The servant of God, Andrei Ivanovitch, took the handmaid of God, Marfa Ivanovna," to be his wife, receiving her from Peter, who acted as her father on this occasion. The resemblance of their names struck the girl as a good omen, and she listened with growing emotion to the rest of the service. The chanting of the choir was new to her; for church music was still a rare innovation. The clouds

of incense produced a curious dreamy feeling. The sacred words of the service, solemnly pronounced over her specially, filled her with awe. The sermon deepened the effect. She was spoken of as one set apart, consecrated to a holy mission. The mind of the Metropolitan, seeking for symbols, saw in her a type of the old wedded to the new, of the East united to the West, of barbarism given over to civilization to be transformed.

As in a dream, Marfa's former beliefs and rooted convictions faded. She forgot that Peter Alexievitch was a man stained with the blood of his own son, that he had degraded sacred Moscow, that he was a drunken, dissolute boor, from whom she had shrunk more than once in terror. The new ideas represented by this new Cathedral in the new capital, grew suddenly tangible to her mind. The tall man towering over her became in her eyes the Father of his country, who had brought a nation into being by his will. His ministers were the tutors and governors of a new people, and her place was to be with them. She, too, must help, or hinder, the great work.

When the long ceremony was over, and the wedding party took boat for the reception at the Vice-Chancellor's house, Marfa felt as if released from a spell. The reaction was violent. She was weary with standing for hours, faint for

want of food, still half stupefied by the incense. Her dream was over. Every one, sinking back into his real place, seemed the meaner and more unworthy by contrast with the wonderful vision. She glanced at her husband, a vague fear suggesting that he was a foreigner. Had not the Metropolitan spoken of the union of East and West? She wished to ask him, but he was at the other side of the boat, deep in a conversation with the Tzar. He had laid aside his marriage crown during the passage of the river, and appeared to have forgotten his bride. She felt lonely and helpless. Catherine was beside her; but the girl was too proud to seek for comfort from a woman she despised.

They reached the Vice-Chancellor's house at last, ascended the wide staircase, and entered the reception-rooms. On the threshold stood a courier with despatches.

"Come!" said the Tzar. "These won't wait. We must discuss them at once."

"Will you excuse me if I leave you for a few minutes?" Ostermann asked, turning to Marfa.

She bent her head in answer. There was a lump in her throat which made speech impossible. Surely it was the strangest home-coming for a bride of seventeen! The rooms were small and crowded, the day was hot. Marfa felt choked, tired, nervous to the verge

of tears. Through the noisy, curious throng there glided a small dark-eyed woman.

"Ah, Princess! May I, too, offer my felicitations?"

"Thanks, Madame."

"I have not seen you since the ball. You charmed the world then by dancing the 'rille' with my friend, Monsieur Lindsay, so I dare to claim a special interest in you. It was my idea, you must remember."

Marfa made no answer. Everything round her was growing dreamlike and uncertain. The weight of the crown pressed so heavily on her head that she could hardly think. Madame's voice sounded far away.

"And it was to your success on that night that you owe the hand of His Excellency, Count Ostermann. What joy for you, Madame—am I the first to call you so?—to have such a husband! No man in Russia stands higher in the Emperor's confidence. For years his advice has been taken in everything."

She paused, hoping Marfa might think of the death of Alexis, to which she dared not refer more openly. Marfa forced herself to make some answer, but even to her own ears her voice sounded faint.

"Count Ostermann is Vice-Chancellor, so naturally advises His Majesty in all foreign matters."

"You seem not to realize that is the greatest proof of confidence the Emperor can show."

Marfa rallied under the sting of outraged national pride.

"We are hardly so humble as to rate the affairs of other nations above our own."

"You mistake me, Princess. The honor is great, not because other countries are of any importance compared with the Russian Empire, but because Count Ostermann, being himself a foreigner—"

"A foreigner?" Marfa echoed, in spite of herself. She did not mean to speak the words aloud.

"You did not know that? Ah! What fresh cause for pride you have! There is no other German in the world who could so entirely sink his own nationality and identify himself with his adopted country. It is the more wonderful, also, for he is not noble, with an inherited tradition of honor and loyalty to the crown he serves. He was a peasant by birth, what you call 'moujik'."

The room swayed before Marfa's eyes. She saw the crowd of wild, savage faces, Mistress Christian standing alone, and Sonia and the hammer. With a cry she fell back in a dead faint.

At once all was confusion and clamor. Every one had a different explanation of the bride's sudden illness, and all the elder women fought

for the application of their favorite remedies. The noise grew greater every minute, until it attracted the attention of the Tzar, who returned with his Minister to inquire the cause of the hubbub.

"Silence!" he roared. "Silence! What is it, Katinka? Ah! The poor child has fainted? Well, the crown must have been too heavy. But all this talk won't help her. Out of this, you gabbling idiots! Here, Andrei, she is your concern now. I will leave her to you."

So Peter, driving the crowd before him with his staff, departed; leaving bride and bridegroom alone.

CHAPTER VIII

Princess and Peasant

OSTERMANN moved Marfa to a sofa near the window, threw it open to let in some fresh air, and then went off to fetch wine. She was beginning to revive when he came back; and as he raised her head rather awkwardly with one hand, holding the goblet of wine to her lips with the other, she opened her eyes.

For a moment she stared at him with wondering curiosity, then consciousness returned. She sat up, gazing round her wildly. Her sudden movement upset the cup he held, and its contents flowed over her white dress. She gave a shuddering cry and flung herself as far from him as the narrow couch would allow.

"It is the color of blood! Would you murder me as they killed my friend, my little mother?"

"Marfa! My wife! What frightens you?"

He spoke soothingly, as he would have spoken to a terrified child. He fancied her delirious and forgetful of her new position. His words only maddened her.

"Your wife? Do you think I will ever be that? You may have forgotten I am a cousin of the Tzar, I shall never forget that you are a serf."

She stopped, panting with mingled rage and terror, like a trapped wild creature. He rose to his feet, he had been kneeling beside her; and stood looking down with puzzled pity in his eyes. He could not understand this sudden fury. She had shown no sign of disliking him before.

She sprang to her feet, unable to endure being looked down on by him even for a moment.

"How dare you watch me like that? Are you too stupid to understand what I say? You are a German, but you can talk Russian glibly enough when you choose. I never guessed that you were a foreigner when you spoke to me in my language, any more than I dreamed you were a serf when I saw you aping the manners of a great noble. Oh! You need not pride yourself on that. It was easy enough to deceive an ignorant country girl!"

Ostermann took advantage of a moment's pause to answer gently:

"I never wished to deceive you, Princess."

"Why did you always speak to me in Russian, then?"

"I thought you preferred it."

"Why did you never tell me you were a German?"

"You did not ask me," he retorted with a shade of impatience in his tone. "Besides," he added more gently, "it is no secret. The whole Court knows it."

"Perhaps, but I did not. I am a Russian noble. I would have died sooner than marry a low-born, foreign adventurer. Ah! If my brothers were here, they would order you to be flogged for your presumption. When a serf dares to insult us, the knout is the only answer."

Ostermann looked at her with outward calm but much perplexity of spirit, and shrugged his shoulders. What was he to do with this child? He saw she was ill, so he did not resent her words. He only wondered what ought to be done to calm her.

"Why don't you answer? Have you no shame, no remorse?" she demanded. "Or are you afraid to speak?"

"What is the use of talking, my child? You are ill, and need rest, if—"

"I won't be called 'my child' by you. Do you not understand? You are only a serf in my eyes, though Peter Alexievitch has chosen to heap favors upon you in payment for your

crimes. You have trapped me into this hateful marriage, but if you attempt to touch me, I will kill you. I swear that by the blessed Saint Alexander Nevski, who heard my vows this morning."

Ostermann drew back as if fearing an immediate attack from the young fury, who confronted him with flaming eyes. Then he spoke very quietly, but in a tone that admitted of no interruption.

"You are making a mistake, Princess, in repeating that I trapped you into this marriage. You have only yourself to blame for not finding out all that now offends you before it was too late. As to your oath, you need fear nothing from me. I did not wish to marry, but was obliged to fulfil the Tzar's express desire. Do not be afraid that I shall ever insist on my rights as your husband."

He turned to go, but she stopped him by a gesture.

"Why did you not marry some one else to please the Tzar?" she asked; still haughty, and perhaps a little more angry than before.

"Because you appeared to be in need of protection," he retorted, "and you had already availed yourself of my help."

"What do you mean?"

"Your position at Court was no happier than

at the banquet where we first met; you desired a way of escape, and I could at least unlock the door."

"You?"

Her voice was wondering, slightly incredulous, but no longer scornful. In her heart she felt doubly disappointed. She did not choose to owe this man anything, and she had believed that her rescue had been effected by her partner at the ball, Walter Lindsay.

"Yes, it was I. Did you not know that?"

She made no answer. She was conscious of a return of the strange giddy feeling, and her legs seemed suddenly too weak to support her. She sat down hastily to avoid the possibility of needing his help. His face softened again. She was only a sick child, after all.

"I will send your maid to you," he said, and withdrew without waiting for a reply.

He told his own freed serf, Ilja, to find the Countess's attendant, and then went to his cabinet. There was the newly arrived despatch to be considered, as well as the cipher to correct: Peter thought it hardly secret enough; but, instead of working, he sat idle. The position must be faced. What was to be done? He realized his helplessness. He could do nothing. What would she do? He could not even guess. He dreaded a scene in

public. If his young wife threw herself at the Tzar's feet and repeated even half of what she had said to him, what a scandal it would make! He shrank from the prospect of open ridicule. The tongues of the courtiers knew no bounds. Reserve and decency were meaningless words to them.

Ostermann felt that the position was extremely hard. In old days, if the bridegroom discovered the bride to be old or ugly, he might at least contrive to keep the secret to himself. He could either make the best of a bad bargain, or he could get her shut up in a convent. In either case, no one saw her, and there was no public scandal; but under the new system, which he himself had supported, no man could keep his matrimonial misadventures to himself. His little white dove had turned into a furious eaglet, tearing with beak and claw; but the worst of it was that every one would know. His world would look on smiling. The experienced diplomatist felt helpless before the uncontrolled anger of his girl-wife.

Meantime, his worst fears were not realized. Marfa did not at once seek the Tzar to clamor for the dissolution of her marriage. She was really ill; and her newly bought serf, Akoulina, was busy looking after her for some days. The first night the young bride was delirious, raving of

Mistress Christian's murder, which she seemed to attribute to her husband's mysterious influence. As she talked chiefly in Scotch, the curious listener made out very little. With dawn she grew calmer; but after she had fully recovered consciousness, she still felt too weak to do much thinking.

For days it was enough for Marfa, usually so active, to lie still, content to be alone and undisturbed. Once the sound of her husband's voice reached her, and she had a slight return of the old terror. He was at the door, asking news of her from Akoulina, and heard the scream of terror she gave.

"Don't let him come near me! Oh! save me, save me!"

He went back to his own rooms, much perplexed, yet pitiful as well. Poor child! What had happened to her to make her like that? He wished he could shield her from the terror that beset her. If only he had found out something of her past and her character before their marriage! Now it was too late.

By degrees strength returned to her; and she had to face the position in her turn. A hundred wild schemes floated through her brain, but she dismissed them all as she grew calmer. It was no use throwing herself at Peter's feet. He would not listen to her. She was his cousin; but

he had chosen this marriage for her, and he would be angry if he suspected her of any unwillingness to go through with it. To go home was out of the question. Her illness made the thought more intolerable than ever. Aunt Tatiana could not help her; she could not come to Saint Petersburg, and Marfa would not go to her. She thought of writing to her brothers; but she feared bringing them into disfavor with the Tzar. They could not return to Russia without his leave. If they did, he might send them to Siberia.

Two alternatives remained: escape and some sort of truce with Ostermann. To the first she devoted much anxious thought; but without an accomplice it was impossible, and she had no friend. When she first came to Court, she made inquiry for Gospoja Hamilton, or Hamatoff; and heard with horror of her execution. She asked no further questions, but the thought added much to her fear. Mary Hamilton was a Maid of Honor—a Court Lady—and she had had her head cut off. Tzar Peter was a terrible man to quarrel with. If she attempted to escape, and failed, she, too, might lose her head.

Last of all, with great reluctance, she began to consider the question of how to make terms with Ostermann. She could not remember what she had said to him after their marriage. Had she insulted him beyond endurance? Was he

waiting for her recovery, to make complaint to the Tzar? Would she be sent to a convent? The thought was horrible. Aunt Tatiana had not enjoyed her five years with an Abbess who looked upon her as a martyr to a holy cause. How much worse it would be to go there as a cast-off wife!

Well! She must try what could be done; and first, she would remember all she had heard of the Vice-Chancellor, that she might know what was his weakest point. He was poor, and she was rich; but if he sent her into a convent, he could probably keep her money, so that was no use. Then an old, half-forgotten speech of her father's came back to her mind. He had spoken of Count Bruce, the wizard, and Ostermann, his colleague. What had he said? Oh, yes! "A coward," that was what he called him. If he were really a coward, the thing might not be so difficult. She took a whole day more to recover strength, lying on a sofa near the window, looking over the river. It was this hateful water which imprisoned her; but for that, escape would not have been impossible. Yet it was rather fascinating to watch, as it slid by, green and sparkling. Where did it come from? Whither did it go? Moving water was something of a mystery to an inland girl, who was only familiar with pumps and wells.

She sent for her husband at last. He came, quiet and very gentle. He was already afraid of her, she thought, and her spirits rose accordingly.

"I wish to speak to you, Andrei," she began in the haughty tone she would have used to a guilty serf. "I do not see any way out of our marriage at present, therefore I intend to stay here for a time. I need a steward to take charge of my property during my brother's absence, and you will probably be capable of fulfilling the duty."

She hesitated a moment. His muscles were well under control, and his face gave no clue to his thoughts.

"Of course you shall receive pay. In fact, since I am nominally your wife, you may take what you like. That is all. You may go."

"Thanks for your gracious permission, Princess; but I have something to say. First, I do not require pay for managing my wife's affairs. Next, I should recommend you to keep this arrangement secret. If you take your friends into your confidence, I fear you are likely to be misjudged."

"Misjudged! Do you think I care for the opinion of the Court?"

"Perhaps not. In that case, you will not be tempted to seek it."

"And I shall not allow you to work for nothing.

I will pay you myself, if you do not take what you want. Do you hear, Andrei?"

"My dear child—" he began impatiently, but she cut him short.

"How dare you speak to me so? Remember you are only a low-born serf in my eyes, and I will kill you if you attempt to take any liberties."

Ostermann shrugged his shoulders, and withdrew. He was relieved that she did not intend to make a public scandal. It was not worth while to risk that by irritating her needlessly. As to the money, if she insisted on giving it to him, he could hand it on to the Tzar's new Foundling Hospital. They need not quarrel over a mere trifle; though that was the one taunt which had stung him. For the rest, he was sufficiently indifferent to her to bear no malice. It is love which finds forgiveness difficult. A weaker man might have argued, protested, pleaded querulously. A stronger man would have mastered her, winning a devoted slave. Count Ostermann was content to let things be. He wanted peace and a quiet life.

CHAPTER IX

Walter Lindsay

PETER had been away since his Minister's marriage, and the Court enjoyed the brief period of repose. It was really too hot to do anything except drink kvas, or gather round the tall Dutch tea-urn, lately come from Holland. Some one invented a Russian name for it, and then even the most old-fashioned learnt to use it. Who could resist a samovar?

At the end of the month Peter came back, and the social treadmill began again. Prince Menschikoff gave a great reception in honor of the Tartar envoys, and all the world came to it. He liked showing off his splendid palace, magnificent jewels, and the pretty women of his household. Before the erection of the Post Office, all the State entertainments were given in his house; now it was no longer necessary, but the economical Tzar was always glad to be spared expense.

Marfa drove there in silence. She was annoyed with her husband for accepting the position so readily. His tact smoothed over all

the difficulties of their daily meetings. He never showed any signs of awkwardness in her presence; neither was he, as a rule, specially humble to her. When he spoke to her as a 'gracious Princess,' she suspected that he was laughing at her. Otherwise his air of deferential courtesy was the same to all women. He was as polite to Akoulina, if he met her.

Madame Desanges was the first acquaintance they met; and Marfa's dislike of her deepened. She even felt vaguely jealous of the brilliant foreign woman, sparkling with wit, while others shone only in jewels. In her exquisitely made dress, worn with French grace, Madame Desanges threw all her neighbors into the shade. From Catherine downwards, the great Court ladies looked dowdy beside her. Either their finery was soiled and shabby; or it was new, because the wearer had but just abandoned the national dress, in which case it was ill-fitting and worn with embarrassed self-consciousness.

"If we were even allowed our own language, it wouldn't be so dreadful," a girl grumbled in Marfa's ear. "It is this cursed German which fits my tongue as badly as these horrible stays do my body!"

"You might talk French. That isn't so bad."

"Hush! For Heaven's sake be careful! I don't know a single word of it, and if the Tzar takes it into his head—Oh! I forgot you are married to one of his Ministers, so you probably despise Russian now."

"No! indeed I don't," Marfa began indignantly. Then she stopped. It would not be keeping to the agreement if she let this stranger guess her feelings.

"Have you forgotten me, Madame?" asked a pleasant voice on the other side; and turning, she saw Lindsay.

"Where have you been? It is an age since we met!"

"I've been with Major Münich on the Ladoga Canal. Now we have quarreled, so I have come back to Saint Petersburg to look for another job."

"But you will stay in Russia, I hope."

"How kind of you to say that, Princess! I do not mean to go unless my King has need of me. My first duty is to him."

Marfa looked grave.

"You must not talk like that here. The Tzar never forgives men who leave his service. I know, because my governess's brother did that. His name was Gordon. Did you ever meet him?"

Lindsay laughed.

"It is not an uncommon name. There is

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an Admiral Gordon here now; perhaps he is a relation."

"I don't know. I think Mistress Christian called her brother Patrick."

"Patrick? Was he the Younger of Glenmusk?"

"Yes. The words sounded like that; but she only mentioned it once: the day she died."

There was a catch in Marfa's voice which spoke volumes to the hearer. Lindsay held out his hand.

"We must be great friends, then, Princess, for Christian Gordon was almost one of us. She was betrothed to my brother."

"Ludovic?" she asked, remembering the strange name.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"They loved each other as children, but she would not marry while our rightful King was a homeless exile. The Queen was not likely to live, and we hoped she would secure the throne for her brother before her death. But these details can't interest you, Princess."

"Oh! They do. There have been troubles like that in Russia; and perhaps there may be again, who knows?"

She was aware that the succession was uncertain. Some people pretended to believe

Alexis was alive. An impostor might arise, and then— She saw herself doing great deeds for her country, like the foreign heroines of whom Mistress Christian had told her.

"Well, our hopes were deceived. The Queen left no instructions. The Hanoverians were too strong for us in London. We could not settle the matter peacefully, as we had wished, so we had to fight. Everything went wrong. There was no plan. Wales made an effort, and so did the English in the North; but nothing was arranged with us. We did not rise together, and we never joined. It ended in disaster for us all."

"Were you there?" Marfa asked, to rouse the young man from the gloomy silence into which he sank as soon as he had ended the history of the Rising.

"No. I was too young, unluckily; but Ludovic fought, and the Gordons."

"What happened to them?"

"Ludovic was hanged. Patrick Gordon escaped. But it wasn't his fault," Lindsay added generously, as an afterthought.

The words were simply spoken, yet they thrilled Marfa with the strange sense of being in touch with one of another race and alien ideals. She could understand his pride in his brother's death, his apology for the man who

still lived. She had learnt to see things from Mistress Christian's point of view; but no one else in the room where they stood could have comprehended it. To those around them it would have been foolishness. The Russians died bravely if there was no escape, but never dreamed of glorying in what a wise man should have avoided.

"He had a wife and child," Lindsay went on; "and he had brought them with him to Scotland. I remember little Nadejda well that year, for she stayed at Glenmusk. Patrick Gordon's mother had been born in Moscow, so she could talk to the child and her Russian mother."

"How strange it must have been for them—living among foreigners!"

"I suppose it was hard, but Patrick's wife was a fool. She interfered with him in everything, wanted to go on long marches with him, and finally hampered his escape. That's how Nadejda was hurt."

"What happened to her?"

"She fell from her pony, rolled down the hillside, and struck violently against a tree. Her back was injured, but her mother wouldn't take her home to Glenmusk. She wouldn't leave her husband. So they wandered about, hiding in caves and trees, till at last they reached

the coast. There they found a ship which took them to France."

"Where are they now? Is Nadejda ill? Couldn't she come to live with me? I should love to have her!"

"They are at Leipzig," Lindsay answered, trying to remember the order in which the questions were asked. "Nadejda is a cripple, and—"

"Oh, poor little thing! How sad!"

"You wouldn't say that if you knew her. There isn't a woman in Russia who is half so cheery. She is a gay Gordon to the tips of her fingers."

"I must have her here. Her aunt was like a mother to me. When could she come?"

Lindsay laughed.

"How excited you are, Princess! I dare say you wouldn't like her if you knew her. Anyway, there isn't any chance of that; for she could never leave her parents. Poor Patrick can't come back to Russia, his wife won't leave him, and Nadia wouldn't desert them."

"But couldn't they be persuaded to send her? It must be difficult for them to look after the child properly."

"The child is older than you, and is their only source of income. She was at a convent in France for a year or two, and learnt to embroider.

She makes money now by her work, and it's badly needed; for her mother is ill and Patrick doesn't earn a kopeck."

"Well! I will pay all Nadejda makes—I am very rich, you know—then they would let her come."

"You don't know what the Scotch are like, Princess. Pat Gordon is as proud as the devil, though he is poor. He would be furious if you offered to buy his daughter. Besides, she is worth more than money to them: but for her, Madame would weep herself into the grave. She is their one consolation."

Marfa was silent for a moment, beating the ground impatiently with one small foot. She had set her heart on having Nadejda. Besides, she hated opposition. The young man, seeing the cloud on her face, racked his brains for an idea. He remembered hearing of her marriage, which he had completely forgotten until now.

"You might get Gordon recalled, perhaps. They say that Count Ostermann can do anything with the Tzar."

Marfa frowned. The suggestion did not please her, and she dismissed her companion ungraciously.

CHAPTER X

The Second Temptation of Count Ostermann

OSTERMANN was watching Marfa's greeting to Lindsay rather wistfully. How charming she could be when she chose! Why did she show such friendliness to a stranger, and nothing but scornful contempt to her husband? After all, this Scotchman was a foreign adventurer, too, and might be a peasant for all she knew.

Some one else watched, not ill pleased.

"If the young savage gets herself entangled in that quarter, so much the better. But Ostermann must not see it too plainly yet. He is a German, and might interfere. Besides, I want a quiet talk with him. It is well to strike while the iron is hot. Bah! What a vulgar metaphor! That comes of living in this vile Court, where the richest noble, Demidoff, was a blacksmith."

Madame Desanges touched the Vice-Chancellor's arm with her fan.

"Come, Monsieur le Comte, I am longing to explore this wonderful palace of Aladdin. We might find the old lamp—or is it a pie-dish? I wouldn't mind which, if by rubbing I could summon a genie to grant all I desire."

She spoke regardless of the bystanders. None of them could follow her rapid Parisian French. When she wished to charm them, she had to force her tongue to a slow, stumbling pace, and rely on her eyes to suggest all that they could not understand from her lips. Count Ostermann was different, and perhaps, for her, his command of her language was his chief attraction.

"What magic gifts has Nature forgotten to bestow?"

"That is an embarrassing question, Your Excellency! How shall I answer? It is not fair for an experienced diplomatist to use his weapons against a foolish, ignorant woman."

He smiled sarcastically, thinking of Marfa.

"You are unjust to your sex, Madame. Even an untaught girl is more than a match for the wariest of men. How much more powerful is an accomplished woman of the world!"

"Have you not discovered that all women are weak when they love? Cupid steals our armor and leaves us defenseless."

"You are more learned than I in such subjects, Madame. I know little of women, and my life has been too busy for love."

"Then it is time for you to acquire the knowledge you lack. Doubtless the Countess will prove a good teacher."

If she had hoped to draw him by that move,

she was disappointed. His face remained impassive. His acquiescence was politely colorless. Clearly, that was not the road to her goal.

"I wished to ask a favor, a very great favor in my eyes, but I fear you will not spare the time to grant it."

"If there is anything in my power—"

"That is rash, Monsieur, for I take it as a promise. You cannot break your word to a lady, my Bayard!"

There was a lingering tenderness in her voice as she uttered the name she chose for him; a scarcely veiled admiration well calculated to soothe a man whose bride scorned him as a peasant adventurer.

"If the wish can be granted by the man, not the Minister—"

"Ah! How suspicious you are! What do I know of your Russian politics? What could I have to ask of the Minister? It is the man, who talks my language, who is kind, courteous, like one of my own people—it is he that I wish to see. I am so lonely, far from my beautiful France! And the evenings are very long. Can you not spare a few hours to console me?"

"Madame wishes to confer a benefit, it seems, rather than exact a ransom for my promise. I should be most happy, but—"

"No! I will not let you off with an empty

compliment and a 'but'. Perhaps you are afraid of meeting some one at my house, but—it is my turn now to use the horrid little word—you need not fear. I shall be all alone to-morrow. Redeem your pledged word by supping with me then, and I will guarantee that there shall be no tiresome third person to talk dull politics. It is a promise, Monsieur."

"But, alas! I am not a free agent. I cannot foresee to-night what I shall do to-morrow. My time belongs to my master, the Tzar."

She pouted, looking younger than he had seen her before, while her bright eyes met his beseechingly. He was only a man, after all, and he melted under the glance.

"If no duty hinders me, I promise that I will come."

"Thank you, my Bayard, a thousand thanks."

Her voice was low and caressing. It was agreeable to be smiled at so sweetly. He remembered pleasant hours spent with her before. Why should he hesitate to give himself such pleasure now? If he did not go to her he would spend the evening alone, and with nothing to do unless a courier brought important despatches during the day. And it would harm no one; certainly Marfa least of all. He was nothing to her, and he could not possibly sink lower in her eyes.

He let himself dream of the future. Marriage had not quite killed his new-born capacity for dreams. His ideas of morality were influenced by his century and surroundings. It was evident that Madame Desanges was still willing to be his friend. Perhaps he despised her a little for that, as most men despise women who are too lightly won; but he would not refuse what she might offer because he doubted the value of the gift. Indeed its worthlessness inclined him to accept it, lest a refusal should appear to her dictated by scorn.

So the night passed, and the morning of the next day. There was nothing before him but the ordinary work of the office. The evening would find him free. The thought grew more pleasing to him. He raised his head, glanced at the clock, and smiled. He was counting the hours like a schoolboy. Then he noticed that Ilja had left the door open. He rose to shut it. Only a heavy curtain hung between him and the head of the stairs, so the noise of passing feet disturbed him. As he laid his hand on the handle he heard voices.

"Au revoir, Monsieur, à bientôt."

"Why not use the kindly Scots since you know it so well, Countess?"

"Good-by, then, and dinna forget," said the other, laughing.

Ostermann shut the door, went back to the table, and sat down. His pen lay idle beside him. He had some thinking to do. If he knew little of life from personal experience, he knew much from watching others. He could easily guess the result of an intimate friendship between Marfa and the young Scotchman. "Will that matter to me?" he asked himself. The answer was not doubtful. He was proud, and he would not look on while the woman who bore his name disgraced it.

Marfa was a child, ignorant of the world, passionate, impulsive. She needed a friend to protect her. He had married her because he knew that. It was a pity the experiment had failed; but something might be done still. Though she despised him, she trusted him to a certain extent. She treated him now like a confidential servant—a steward, as she said. It was not flattering to his vanity, but it was better than nothing. He must keep some power over her if his pride were not to suffer. If she knew him to be like the rest, he could not gain her respect, and he would have no right to object to her following his example.

Mechanically he dipped his pen in the ink and drew intricate mazes on the paper before him. They represented his view of life: a curi-

ous, purposeless tangle of lines leading nowhere and meaning little. Men and women were so petty and insignificant individually that it hardly mattered what they did, or how they did it. The real interest of the world was in watching the growth of an Empire which might last hundreds of years. An oak-tree outlived a thousand generations of the midges that danced in its shade. Since Life was so short and of small importance, why not enjoy it? Why interfere with another's pleasure? Why sacrifice your own?

He looked again at the clock. Time was passing. He must decide quickly. He rose and walked to the window. Before him lay the city, built on three marshy islands. It seemed to float on the river like a water-weed. A lily would be too beautiful a comparison for the irregular jumble of houses. But some of the buildings were as magnificent as the conception of their wonderful creator. The gilded cupolas of a great church flashed back the sun, dazzling the eyes that beheld it.

Peter was remarkable enough to impress even his intimates. What would he do in such a case? wondered his Minister. The answer seemed so obvious that Ostermann began to doubt if it were the truth. The man enjoyed every pleasure that came his way;

but that did not affect the Tzar. His sense of duty was different. Russia was his wife; he was responsible for her. Catherine was no ignorant girl when he married her. She took men and things as she found them. Her experience did not induce her to expect much in the way of perfection, consequently she got nothing. It was Russia that corresponded to Marfa in the life of the Tzar. She did not recognize his greatness, resented his interference with old customs, only submitted because her traditions made submission seem unavoidable; yet Peter served her as faithfully as if she had returned his devotion, and nothing could tempt him to swerve from his allegiance.

Ostermann turned from the window with a sigh. His decision had taken a long time to reach, but he had come to it at last. Perhaps if he had cared greatly for either woman he would have been quicker; as it was, he knew that it was the Tzar's influence that decided him. He studied his master critically, knew his faults, despised his failings; yet was more impressed by the grandeur of his ideals than were any of his other ministers. Peter would sacrifice all for duty. Well! he must not fall below his sovereign's standard. After all, his promise had been conditional last night—to come if no duty hindered.

CHAPTER XI

a Chêtardie's Desire

MADAME DESANGES dropped the brief note of apology which she was re-reading for the tenth time. Her quick ear had caught the splash of oars. Had Ostermann thought better of it? Was he coming, after all? She flew to the window and looked out. It was late, and even the tardy Russian sun had set. The long-drawn-out twilight was closing in, and the little curling wreaths of mist rising from the water made distant objects indistinct. Some sort of a boat was visible, but more than that she could not see.

"He must not catch me watching for him," she reflected, closing the shutter again quickly. "It will be better to show a little indifference. He must care more than I believed, if he cannot keep away after such a note. Well, at that stage coldness increases ardor. I shall be merely surprised at his coming when I no longer expected him."

Madame Desanges picked up a romance that

was lying on a table. She did not care for reading, but it seemed the most fitting pose.

"If I were working he would know I had been dull. I should have asked some one to come. It would have been good for him to find me gay and surrounded by more faithful adorers. But then I wanted to see him alone."

She sighed, rose, glanced at the mirror, and arranged herself in another effective attitude. The boat had reached her landing-stage. Some one entered the house. Steps came up the stairs. She raised her hand to her throat.

"How my heart beats! I am silly enough to be in love with this cold German."

A stolid Russian servant opened the door and announced, in execrable French:

"Monsieur le Marquis de la Chêtardie!"

Madame rose, her lips smiled a greeting, but there was a distinct pucker between her delicately penciled eyebrows. She was not pleased. Her visitor was not welcome.

"Do I find you alone, Madame?"

"Can that surprise you, Monsieur?"

"You told me that you expected Count Ostermann."

"And he probably guessed that you were coming."

"Impossible. I only ordered my boat half an hour ago."

Madame looked obstinately incredulous. The Marquis, having kissed her hand with his usual elaborate courtesy, followed her example, and sat down.

"You failed to secure him, then?" he inquired, after a pause.

"It would appear so," she answered irritably.

"Ah! Those whom the King loves succeed."

"It is counted success, Monsieur, to win the love of a King."

"But he does not love those who fail."

La Chêtardie spoke quietly, as though merely thinking aloud; but Madame understood the significance of his words. Her tactics changed.

"I am sure he knew that you were coming. He is clever enough to foresee your move if he had a hint of your knowledge of our plans. Last night he promised to come unless prevented by business. This evening he sent a curt note, regretting that his duty made it impossible for him to keep his engagement. Oh! Why did you come? If you had given me a little time, one night even, he would have been like wax in our hands. I could have asked you then to meet him here with his full consent, and he would have earned the King's gratitude to please me."

The Marquis looked up from studying the emeralds on his snuff-box, glanced at his hostess's

face, and then at the jewels again. He took a pinch of the snuff delicately between finger and thumb; then gracefully displayed a small, lace-edged, finely embroidered handkerchief. She made no attempt to force him to speak, so he spoke at last.

"Suppose that I decided he was too blunt a tool?"

Madame laughed.

"Blunt? That is a strange word to apply to the Vice-Chancellor!"

"Perhaps; but he may be none the less unfitted for the work I wish to do."

"We could do it in spite of him."

The young man shook his head.

"You underrate his powers, Madame. But we could do it without him."

Madame Desanges grew pale.

"Would you murder him?" she asked anxiously.

"That were too harsh a measure. I am quite willing to let him live—out of Russia."

"What then? Will you kidnap him?"

Her voice was under her control again. She affected to treat the idea lightly; but she felt that the suggestion threatened destruction to her world. She wished to rule the most powerful minister in this barbarous empire, and she would delight in proving her influence over him by forcing him to serve her country. She realized

that she loved him more than any other man on whom she had smiled. His devotion would have touched her heart as well as flattered her vanity. But if he were ruined, he would lose more than half his charm. It was his power that made him interesting. His superiority to his neighbors in character was piquantly perplexing; his superiority to them in the Tzar's favor was a more tangible proof of greatness.

"Kidnapping is too risky. It is never worth while to hazard your highest card if the trick can be taken as well by the knave."

"You speak in riddles, Monsieur."

"Were my meaning clear you might betray it to Count Ostermann."

"You are unjust, Marquis!"

"But is it not true?"

"That I would betray any one who represents my beloved France? Never!"

The Marquis laughed. He distrusted heroics, and believed, like Walpole, that every one had his price, or hers.

"Ah! How pretty you look playing at indignant virtue! It is an admirable rôle."

"You will not believe me?"

"Do not be angry, Madame. I have no wish to be impolite. Let us say I believe you with childlike faith; only I cannot gratify your curios-

ity. I will confide in you so far. My one desire is to ruin Ostermann—it is a vow I made to the Goddess of Fortune that I would, and one must keep faith with a divinity; but the time and the means are my secret."

Madame Desanges tried pleading.

"Have a little patience, Marquis! He will yield to me soon. You need not fear that his childish, half-witted wife will stand between us. She quarreled with him on their wedding-day, and insults him constantly, whenever they meet. I know all about it; for her maid is betrothed to one of my stupid lackeys, and tells him all she hears."

"What has that to do with me?" the Marquis asked disdainfully.

"Only it shows how easily I could win and keep him. He has no one else to care for, and he will do for love what he would never do for threats or bribes. Let me try, Monsieur!"

"It is useless, Madame. I gave you this one chance, and you failed. It is too late now to do more. I must leave Russia in a few days; and I may not return for months, or even a year or two. I should never come back, probably, were it not for my vow."

"Then this will be good-by?" she asked, rising.

He rose, too.

"Not for us, Madame. Though you have failed now, I find you too charming to leave behind. You might succeed after I was gone, and I do not wish Campredon to reap the benefit. It is a personal matter between me and Ostermann. No one else shall rob me of my desire."

"But if I refuse to go, Monsieur le Marquis?"

"You will not refuse what I request, Madame."

She thought of her husband in the galleys. She had no wish to join him; and by lettres de cachet the Marquis could make himself a formidable enemy to a French subject, even though she were in Russia.

The Marquis returned to the Embassy, leaving Madame to weep away her rage and disappointment. He reflected that she had evidently set her heart on this German fellow, which was inconceivably foolish of her. She would become useless if she often indulged in such caprices. A French spy had no right to individual fancies.

"I shall succeed in the end. I will not give up the game because I have lost a trick or two. It was annoying that my plans miscarried tonight; for they seemed flawless. They were so simple, and the affair would have been ended before I returned to France. Mikhail, there, is a police spy and would have reported to his master the secrecy which surrounded my private meeting with Count Ostermann. Peter's sus-

picions once aroused, all would have been well."

He drew his cloak round him and leant back in the boat. The tiny trails of mist were meeting, mingling, clinging to everything that was low enough to be reached by them. The air was very damp, and chilly after the great heat.

"I detest these marshes, but I must come back," the Marquis thought. "I will not be beaten. I will succeed, though it takes years to accomplish."

CHAPTER XII

The Smell of the Sea

TWO days later the Court moved to Peterhof. The Tzar assembled the flotilla of boats, and gave orders that all should reach the bay of Cronstadt before the evening. It was no gay regatta, such as used to delight him in old days. There were no bands to play noisy music on the bigger barges. Peter was out of health, and in low spirits. Every one should go to Cronstadt by water, but they might go as they pleased, in any vessel they chose; he did not care.

It was a wonderful sight to see the start. Graceful yachts, built on finest lines, and appearing like white swans floating on the water; for their large sails hid everything else; heavy, broad-bottomed Dutch boats, called buyers; magnificent barges, painted, gilded, and rowed by men in gorgeous liveries; and a host of smaller craft of different shapes and sizes. There were Venetian gondolas, and Turkish caiques, brought by traveled Russians, eager to win the notice of the Tzar by showing interest in his favorite pastime.

Marfa looked on, wondering and secretly fascinated. She was to sail in Lindsay's boat; for her husband was with his master. At her feet crouched Akoulina, fearing the voyage exceedingly, and murmuring prayers to all the dear inland saints to save her from the terrors of this unknown element. Lindsay moved here and there, loosening the ropes till the white sails rounded out like clouds. Then he returned to his place in the stern, and leant one arm on the tiller as he talked to his guest.

"Isn't she a beauty, Princess? Did you ever dream there was such perfect motion?"

"It is as good as riding—almost; and far better than sledging."

"Wait a little, and you will withdraw that 'almost.' Riding can never be half the joy to a woman that sailing is."

He thought of the Russian ladies he had seen sitting on their saddles, bundled up in masses of clothes so that they looked like sacks.

"But you don't know how well I can ride," she answered, half laughing, half indignant. "I used to gallop with my brothers on wild, barebacked horses. Ah! how I loved Nikita! He was shy and fierce to every one else, but he always came the moment he heard my voice."

"What did Christian say to your riding barebacked?"

"You know as well as I do whether she would be shocked."

He laughed.

"You are right. She was wild enough herself, and a daredevil. She rode once, dressed as a man, to waylay a soldier with despatches."

"Tell me all about it," she commanded.

"It was a sad story; for, though she got what she wanted, it did not serve Ludovic as she had hoped. He was hanged in spite of all she could do, and they put his head on a spike at Temple Bar. My mother wept when she heard of that; but Christian bade her take courage, for she had vowed not to leave her true love's head to be a gazing-stock in London. So she went up alone, and one dark, stormy night she succeeded in taking it down from Temple Bar, and she brought it home to be buried in his father's grave."

Marfa listened, thrilling with excitement. This thing had been done by a woman for the sake of her love. She grew still more eager, as her companion talked on. The thought of Scotland roused him, and he poured forth a store of wondrous tales of the doings of heroes and heroines in the stormy days of the Fifteen. Marfa leant to one side, trailing her fingers in the water which rippled sharply against the boat. Her eyes were fixed on his face. She

no longer saw the flat, wooded shores of the river. Saint Petersburg and its marshes were far away from her.

Under the spell of his words she fancied she could almost see the purple mountains he loved so passionately. She had passed through Kieff, and remembered the low hill on which it stands; but it was difficult to imagine range behind range of distant peaks, each fainter, more shadowy, than those in front. How marvelous the streams must be! It was still harder to realize them. A hundred hurrying, tinkling brown burns, flecked with white foam as they dashed against moss-covered rocks; and she knew only great, broad rivers, flowing on majestically from some unknown source to some unknown goal.

A longing to see these beautiful things with her own eyes took possession of her. For the first time she felt impatient with her own vast country, stretching, unbroken by mountains, from the Pole to the Sea of Azof. The dreariness of the leagues of forest she had traversed, the stories she had heard of the monotony of the steppes, filled her with sudden anger.

"It is so tame!" she said aloud. "I want variety."

"What do you mean?"

She flushed hotly. He should not guess

that she had been comparing Holy Russia unfavorably with foreign lands. She must have been bewitched to dream of such heresy.

"I meant the sea. You said that in coming here you saw nothing but water for days. That would be terribly dull, I think," she answered glibly.

"You have not seen it yet, Princess, or you would not talk like that. The sea is a living thing, beautiful as a woman, and as changeful; sometimes caressing, sometimes cruel, but lovable always. No two of its waves are alike, and every minute its face changes. You see a dozen different colors as the sun shines, or the dark clouds sweep across the sky. One moment it is deep blue, then clear, transparent green with white crested waves; then all dull and gray, with, perhaps, a purple streak on the horizon."

Marfa pouted. She was uncertain in her moods to-day. Two minutes ago she thought Lindsay the most charming companion in the world; now she was angry at his enthusiasm for the sea. That was Peter's best-loved plaything. No one else liked it really, they merely pretended they did to please him. Perhaps, unconsciously, she was hurt that this young man treated her as a child, and not as one of the beautiful women he seemed to have ad-

mired. She was a girl still, but her nature held latent powers of passionate love or hate, and her heart was empty.

On his side Lindsay recognized in her only a link with his Scotch home. She spoke his language, danced his dances, sympathized with his ideals. His heart was still sore with wounds inflicted by a fair lady, whose cruelty drove him forth to seek his fortunes. He felt years older than this child educated by Christian, who should have been his brother's wife; though, possibly, had he known how little was needed to win her blind, all-absorbing devotion, he might have been tempted to try.

"At last!" he cried out cheerily.

The breeze freshened, the water no longer moved with them, but slapped the bows of the boat in impotent vexation. Away on the right an island, covered with buildings, rose out of the river, came nearer, nearer, as if racing to meet them, passed, and sank away behind. The little yacht quivered and leapt like a living creature. Marfa had jumped over ditches and fallen logs when she was hunting; she felt something of the same eager tightening of her nerves now.

There was a strange smell in the air. The wind whipped her cheek. The hot blood tingled through her veins. She sat up, leant for-

ward, and sniffed with lifted head like a wild deer in the forest. Lindsay saw one of her small, pink ears twitch.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Dip your hand in the water again, Princess, and taste."

Eagerly she obeyed, and lo! a miracle! The tips of her fingers were salt.

"Is it the sea?"

"Yes. How do you like it?"

"I love it! Oh, Mr. Lindsay, do bring me out often in your boat! I could never feel lonely with the sea as a friend."

Poor child! Did she feel lonely? Probably that grave husband neglected her. He was busy, and likely to forget that children and dogs require constant notice. They would rather be beaten than left alone.

"Well, you must come here often if you like. There are lots of foreign boatmen who could bring you. I fancy no Russian would come so far unless the Little Father and his big stick were with you."

"But you will bring me sometimes, too, won't you?"

"I wish I could; but I can't. I am half sorry now, though this morning I was delighted. Count Bruce sent for me to say that I was promoted a step, and I am to go back to Astrakhan."

"Why do they send you?"

"Oh! I fancy I have a friend at Court who has managed that."

"Who is he?" Marfa demanded, with an angry suspicion at her heart.

It was just the sort of trick a cowardly, treacherous, revengeful serf would play—to watch stealthily until he discovered that there was one person she liked, and then to banish that person by underhand means.

"It isn't a man at all. I think it must be that good-natured little Frenchwoman, Madame Desanges. She promised to do me a good turn some day, and she is on the best terms with a certain Field Marshal."

Marfa drew away coldly. She had a long score against that vivacious little lady, but this was the heaviest debt. It altered her opinion of Lindsay. A man who accepted favors from such a source was no hero to her.

He talked on about the country, telling her many interesting facts about the people. He had seen much of the Indian colony at Astrakhan, and told her how the "Banyan" women burnt themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres.

"What makes them do that?" Marfa inquired, rather scornfully. She was inclined to disbelieve the story altogether.

"It is a custom that the men invented to pro-

tect themselves from being murdered by their wives, and their mothers take care that it is carried out. Any one who refuses leads such a terrible life that she longs for death."

"But how are there any mothers left alive to interfere?"

"It is only the favorite who dies with her husband. The older women escape."

"Oh!"

Marfa was silent for a few minutes, while Lindsay busied himself in bringing the boat round for their return to Peterhof. The girl sat gazing at the golden path across the sea which they were sailing away from so fast. It was following after them; but that did not comfort her. The bow of the yacht was towards the cold gray east: the glory of the day was behind them. She thought that her life would be like that. Her only happiness lay in the past.

"I don't believe you are right about those heathen women," she said suddenly. "It is not custom, or fear of the future, that makes them kill themselves. It is because they were so happy that they cannot bear to know it is all over. If I loved some one very much, I would not live without him, and I would be glad to be the only one to die with him, that he might know I loved him best."

Then she saw the low hill, sixty feet high, on

which Peter had built his country palace. A boat was already moored at the landing-stage, and she fancied that she could make out her husband's slight figure, walking beside the giant Tzar. Ah! why was she married to a man she could never love, a mere peasant whose very name was a disgrace to her?

CHAPTER XIII

The Passing of Peter

MONTHS passed, and the winter came. Marfa delighted at first in the new pleasures it brought. She learnt to skate; and the rush over the smooth ice consoled her for the loss of her friend the sea. It was wonderful to cross from one island to another by sledge instead of boat. There was hunting in the forests on the mainland, too. Indeed, now the river was frozen, the game came almost to her door. Wolves were seen among the scattered houses, and some children were carried off.

Marfa's happy mood did not last long. There was a restless impatience in her heart which made her capricious and hard to please. Ostermann wondered much over her rapid changes from childlike gaiety, or pensive gentleness, to unreasonable fury. She cared nothing for the presence of the servants; so, unless there were guests to entertain, nothing restrained her. One moment he would read wistful entreaty in her eyes, and while he was gravely considering her possible wants, they would change to a blaze

of scornful anger. Then she would hurl insults at him, or treat him to an outbreak of the contemptuous loathing with which she regarded those beneath her.

For his own sake he would have avoided all opportunity for such scenes; but consideration for her hampered him. She was too much alone as it was. He wished that she had some friend to look after her. Where could he find one? And, as he pondered that problem, she quoted her aunt. She was friendly that day, and the sentiment attributed to her relation sounded encouraging.

"I did not know that any of your family were in Russia," he said cautiously.

"There is only my mother's sister, Tatiana Gregorievna. She is all I have in the world except my brothers."

"Is she unmarried?"

"You would not ask that if you had ever seen her! She is hideously ugly, and besides she had no dowry to tempt a fortune hunter."

The last words suggested the approach of a storm. Ostermann hastened to tack for the nearest shelter. He looked at his watch, and then rose, saying casually:

"I wonder you do not ask her to live with you."

"I should like it very much; but she was

Maid of Honor to the Grand Duchess Maria, and—"

"I could arrange that difficulty if you wished it."

"Thanks, Andrei Ivanovitch; but I would rather not trouble you."

It was the first time she had called him anything except a curt "Andrei" as if he were a servant. Now she spoke more politely, and only remembered their relative positions in time to end coldly. When she was alone she cried without knowing exactly why; but a few days later she was aware of the cause of her joy at hearing that Aunt Tatiana was pardoned. She was growing afraid of herself. It was so difficult to treat the low-born adventurer as he deserved. He was cleverer than she; and acted the part of an accomplished, courteous gentleman so well that she was often perilously near to forgetting that he was really only a peasant who had tricked her into a hateful marriage. Aunt Tatiana would prove a safeguard.

Meantime the Vice-Chancellor had other serious matters to trouble him. It was growing evident to all near the Tzar that the future of Russia was hanging in the balance. He could not live much longer, and what would happen when he died? The doctors were quarreling over their patient, and he was deaf to their best advice. There was

so much to do in the short time that was left. Day after day he rode across the half-frozen marshes surrounding his capital, to inspect all the various works begun. One evening he saw a boat, full of soldiers, aground and in danger of capsizing. He rushed to the rescue, and stood up to his waist in ice-cold water. He saved the men, and came home to die.

Ostermann spent hours with him, listening to all he would say about the future. There was much that all the ministers wanted to know, above all who was to succeed; but that was the one subject the dying man avoided, and no one could press it on him. They were alone to-day, and had been discussing the difficulties with England, the financial support to be given to the exiled Prince, the possibility of creating serious trouble in Great Britain or Ireland. Then Peter lay back, with his eyes closed. Ostermann rose to go.

"No, don't leave me, Andreyushka. I have still much to say."

"I am always at your orders, Sire."

"Are you happy in your marriage?"

The piercing dark eyes opened to watch him as he answered, but the Vice-Chancellor's face seldom betrayed him.

"Can Your Majesty doubt it?"

"I was not sure. She is very young, and

you were so indifferent to women. Take care of her, my little brother! Do you quite understand how much a wife counts for in a man's life?"

"I am learning," the other answered with a curious smile.

"Yes, yes. It will be as I hoped. She will bind you closer to Russia, and you will use her to help on our great work. She will train up your children to be brave, truthful, and loyal, not only to the Crown, but to their country and its laws. Ah! That is where women have the power. We men can shape the present, but the future is always in their hands. I owe everything to my mother, and she had learnt in her turn from the good Scotch aunt."

Again he was silent, thinking of all the women he had known. His mother had influenced him most; his sister had proved with cruel force that a woman could seize and keep the power as well as a man; his first wife, Eudoxia, was the mother of a weak, vicious son; his second wife, Catherine, peasant and foreigner, showed herself strong, patient, resourceful, undaunted by misfortune.

"I do not regret having made her Tzaritza," he murmured. "What was it I wanted to say to you? There is so much on my mind,

but I forget. It is this cursed pain which confuses my thoughts."

"Your Majesty has, perhaps, talked too much already. When you are rested—"

"Rested! Andrei Ivanovitch, do you not know that I shall rest only in my grave? Why do you try to deceive me? You are the one man I trust. Put aside your cold formality, and let us speak heart to heart."

Ostermann dropped on his knee beside the bed, took the hand Peter held out to him, and kissed it with more devotion than he had ever shown before.

"Say what you will, my Emperor. I am listening, and shall never forget."

"Men call you a coward, little brother; can you understand my fear? I don't think so. For, though you would not run into danger like a heedless boy, you would not shrink from it as I do. All my life Death has seemed terrible to me: in my childhood, when the Strelitzes tried to kill me in my mother's arms at the foot of the high altar; in my manhood, when I fled from Charles at Narva; but, most of all, now, when I see the dark shadow drawing nearer day by day."

"Yet you became a brave soldier, and I have seen you calm during a storm at sea which made the boldest tremble."

"That was only because I hid the terror in my heart. I have forced myself to do many things which were horrible to me. The sight of water used to bring on my fits, but I knew Russia must seek her greatness by the sea. I could not leave her an isolated inland state, the barbarous Asiatic Muscovy. As for fighting, I found my soldiers were cowards and thought it no disgrace to run away. They even boasted that flight was true wisdom. So I had to lead them myself, but I was always frightened."

"God grant us all such fear!"

"Ah! You do believe in God? They call you 'atheist,' so I did not know. I believe, too, but I fear Him. It is dreadful to lie here dying, and to think of the Afterwards. I have done much amiss. Will God forgive me because I tried to do my best for the nation He confided to my charge? Or will He refuse me pardon, as I refused it to my own son?"

The grave, self-contained diplomatist wondered at this outburst. He had merely made use of a well-worn formula to express his conviction that the Tzar's cowardice was the highest heroism. He shrank embarrassed from the sight of a soul laid bare before him.

"I will arise, like the son in the Parable, and go to my Father, and will say unto Him,

'I am unworthy to call myself Thy son, but I have worked for Thee as a hired servant; forgive me if I have erred in that work.' Will He, do you think? I am merciful to my servants if their crimes are not against our country. I know that men are weak, and brutal, and ignorant, and I forgive them if they have not been false to their public duties."

"Surely the God who made will understand," Ostermann answered, to comfort his master.

"And will that mean forgiveness? Do you forgive when you understand the reason for people's faults against you?" the Tzar persisted.

Ostermann thought of Marfa. Things would be easier if he had the clue to her moods.

"I think so."

"But I did not pardon my own son."

"There was too much at stake. He would have undone your work and plunged the country back into barbarism."

"You defend me, Ostermann? Yet you did not advise it then."

"It was not my province. Besides, he was so weak that—"

"You pitied him. You forget that he was strong enough to kill his wife with blows as well as neglect. No, I do not repent his death;

but I wish it had not been necessary—if I had not been Tzar."

Catherine entered the room, anxious lest her husband was doing himself harm by this prolonged interview.

Peter turned his head towards her.

"Katia!"

"I am here, my little soul!"

"I want you to remember what I am going to say. Ostermann has promised never to leave Russia, and you must not forget that he is the only man who understands her real interest. Trust him always, and take his advice in everything."

Then he let Ostermann go; and the Vice-Chancellor went away graver and more preoccupied than before. The Grand Duke was to be passed over in favor of a woman, who was both a foreigner and a peasant. What would the Russians say?

CHAPTER XIV

Marfa's Friends

EVERYBODY expected a revolution; but none came. Each of the malcontents waited for some one else to act; and, meanwhile, the Guards stood firmly by the jolly, good-natured woman who had shared in the hardships of so many campaigns.

"It is shameful!" said Aunt Tatiana.

"That the Tzaritza should have been a foreign slave!" added her niece, but with little bitterness. She liked Catherine personally.

"Bah! What does the rank matter? The disgrace lies in making a woman the ruler of our Holy Russia."

Marfa was not sure of her agreement with that opinion. Mistress Christian had taught her to be proud of her sex.

"Cannot a woman govern as well as a man?"

"Impossible! It is unnatural, against all tradition."

"Why? Are we so inferior?" Marfa asked scornfully. Her recent experiences did not allow her to rate men very high.

Aunt Tatiana glanced at her sharply, but said nothing. The girl, provoked by her silence, began to find examples to support her argument. Women had ruled over foreign countries, but her aunt would not care for anything outside Russian history; and was probably too ignorant to believe it, either.

"Olga was our first saint."

"Yes, but she had no power while on earth. She could not even convert her husband."

"Her son became a Christian."

"For the sake of marrying the Byzantine Princess."

"Well, she was a woman," Marfa retorted triumphantly.

Again her aunt gave her a searching glance.

"Since when have you learned to argue with your elders? Does your husband allow you to contradict him?"

"Count Ostermann? Do you suppose he dare forbid it?"

Marfa had meant to be very prudent in keeping her own counsel as to her relations with her husband; but temper swept away caution.

"Dare forbid," repeated her aunt in horrified amazement. "That is not the way to speak. I have known men beat their wives for less than that. Why, your own cousin is kept locked up by Prince Saltikoff, and fed on bread and

water for days together; though she was a Dolgorouki."

"Anyway, he isn't a foreigner."

"Oh! you may be sure that foreigners are not so superior to us when they are at home."

"I never said they were," answered the girl, angrily. "Besides, Count Ostermann is not at home. He is in Russia, and this house is almost as much mine as his."

"Nonsense, Marfa Ivanovna! No married woman has the right to talk like that. Everything you have belongs to him as much as you do, yourself. Don't make any mistake about that. A woman's only power lies in influencing her husband. That is why the country should be governed by a man; for then, if the woman who rules him is wise, everything will be well, and if she is a fool, she will leave State affairs to the ministers, who will be chosen for their capacity. Whereas, if a woman sits on the throne, it is just the other way."

Aunt Tatiana was talking seriously, and her niece listened, controling her impatience. She wanted to belong to the reactionary side, because it was opposed to Ostermann; so she must learn their arguments.

"My mother, God rest her soul, was a friend of Princess Sophia," the elder lady continued. "There was a woman for you! She made her-

self absolute master of Russia, with no help from Church or law. Hidden away in the terem, she clutched the reins, and got on to the driver's seat before any one guessed her designs. The wild, murderous Strelitzes were her dogs; she made use of them for the hunt, they dared not disobey. Then when her power was secure, she yielded everything to Vassili Galitzin, and became his tool. Oh! We are all alike. Give us a crown, and we become the slave of the first good-looking man who offers us a kiss: coop us up behind a barrier, and we rule the world through the puppet who calls himself our master."

Marfa frowned. Mistress Christian never held such views.

"If women govern through men, it is better to do it openly. Lying about nothing is horrible, and makes the thing worse."

"What ideas you have, child! It is all the doing of that strange governess. She never could understand that there are always two ways of trying to get what you want. When your father, may he be forgiven, wished to make love to her, she was quite angry; yet only the day before, she had spoken of the difficulty of making him provide what she wanted for you."

"I will not let you speak against her, Tatiana Gregorievna!"

"What have I said that need offend you?"

"I would rather not discuss her with you."

"That is a fine way to speak to your mother's sister! You are being ruined by these foreigners. Your Scotch governess began it, and your lazy German husband will finish it. He ought to beat a little common sense into you."

"You forget that I am a noble, a cousin of the Tzar, and he is a peasant."

"You might have been the Tzar's daughter, for all the difference that makes. A woman takes the rank of her husband; if yours was a serf, so much the worse for you."

Marfa sat still, appalled by this entirely new view of the case.

"It is quite true," pursued the other. "Catherine was a maid-servant before the army took the town she lived in; then she became the General's slave; yet when Peter Alexievitch, may he be— Well, when the late Tzar married her, no one objected on the score of her low birth. If Eudoxia had not been still alive, Catherine would have been his legal wife in the eyes of all."

"But what am I to do?"

"Nothing, except pray to the saints that Andrei Ivanovitch may not send you to a convent as his master did Eudoxia."

Marfa drew herself up proudly. Ostermann dared not do that. She would kill him if he suggested it. Her cousins, the Dolgoroukis,

would protect her from being secretly disposed of. Still, she wished she had known all this before. She had made so many mistakes out of ignorance. If she attempted any apology now, he would take it as a sign of weakness.

"If only he were a man, I might forgive him; but he is a cowardly, treacherous, effeminate foreigner. I dare not give way, or I should be lost," she said to herself.

Then, as her aunt alluded to the position of a serf's wife whenever she wished to annoy her, Marfa's bitterness increased. Ostermann had trapped her into this intolerable position. It was all his fault; and she hated him.

There was little change in Marfa's manner towards her husband for the next few months. He congratulated himself on being able to leave her so much to her aunt's society; and at times forgot about her altogether: for he was busier than ever. Besides the complete control of foreign affairs, he was interested in many internal reforms, which had to be suggested with delicate tact, and were only carried at last by infinite patience. In addition, he was begining to superintend the education of the young Grand Duke, Peter Alexievitch. He foresaw that Catherine's reign would be short, and there were obvious reasons why her daughters should give place to the male heir.

Marfa was much with her Dolgorouki and Galitzin cousins in those days. Prince Ivan was about her own age, fond of sport; but too selfish to attract her much. He reminded her of what Vladimir had been before Mistress Christian came. He spoke lightly of women, and never dreamed of giving way to her. That annoyed the girl who was accustomed to ordering everything in her own house. So she turned to the older members of the family.

Prince Alexis, the father of Ivan, interested her for a time. He chafed under the new government. Catherine's rule was offensive chiefly because the power was in the hands of Menschikoff. He had been her protector, her supporter when she wished to take the crown, he was now her favorite. She put up with Ostermann because Peter had desired it; Menschikoff was her real friend.

"He is insufferable, that upstart!" grumbled Prince Alexis. "His manners are detestable. He speaks to us as if we were his grooms. He will soon order us to kiss his hand!"

"You would never do that!" Marfa exclaimed.

"Ah, my child. The way to Siberia is long, and I have no wish to tread it. Do not repeat what I have said to your husband. He is a most excellent man; the colleague I respect

and esteem most highly. If only we could rule Russia together, all would be well! It is this baker's boy whose rudeness I can't swallow."

"But, surely, Menschikoff's father was one of us! I have heard—"

"You have heard much, little cousin; but, perhaps, not everything. There is a place—somewhere near Poland, I think—where they make pedigrees. In that way it is easy enough to claim a descent from Rurik even. You alter a letter of your name, for instance, and change from the plebeian Praxine to the aristocratic Apraxine. If you are a favorite, nothing is said. Your supposititious cousins are eager to take advantage of the relationship."

"How mean! I would never stoop to curry favor with an impostor, a man I despised!"

"Then you would be foolish, my little sister. Those who stoop lowest rise highest."

Marfa went away disappointed. Her cousin must be jesting when he talked like that; but, all the same, it annoyed her. Prince Galitzin was more to her taste. He had never cringed to any one in his life. He kept up the old customs in defiance of the late Tzar; yet he had rendered splendid service to the country. No foreign adventurer was his superior in that. He was as brave, as politic, as far-

sighted as any of them. He sat in state with his family standing round. All kissed his hand on entering or leaving, even his brothers, who were his colleagues in the Senate. He welcomed Marfa kindly whenever she came to pay her respects; but there was little friendliness between them.

"I do not love the Germans," he said frankly. "You have married one, Marfa Ivanovna, and you are, therefore, only half a Russian."

"Forgive me, Dimitri Mikhailovitch, if I venture to differ from you. A woman may be a patriot, whatever her husband is!"

"You should never speak so, child. Listen, all of you, to the scolding I am going to give your cousin; for it will do you all good. I have traveled and read many books, to find out what is best for Russia; and this is my conclusion: We are not a great nation because we are not true to each other. Marfa says that she is not at one on all points with her husband; if any evil person overheard, he would use the knowledge to ruin both. The Scotch have a story of a man who wished to break sticks. While they were in a bundle all together, he could do nothing; once they were untied, he could break them easily."

The assembled relations listened with secret impatience. They had enough of Scotchmen

in real life. No one wished to have stories about them.

"Marfa is a silly child," said Prince Mikhail, the nephew. "Of course no woman has a right to differ from her husband. If Ostermann were sent to Siberia—"

An awful hush fell on all present. Even Marfa turned pale.

"There! That's what I say. Mikhail begins to talk like a fool, and although he is among members of his own family, we are all afraid that some one may betray him. We must learn to trust each other. Perhaps we shall, under the gracious rule of Prince Menschikoff. He sends whole families to Siberia, so that no one benefits by his relation's misfortunes. It is a fine system!"

Marfa left with one of the younger Galitzins.

"The old man is cross to-day. He wants a constitution, and sees no way of getting it. I always know when he has just heard from Sweden, because then he finds fault with us all about everything. The Swedish Government is the only perfect one in his eyes. There the power is all in the hands of the great nobles."

Marfa sympathized still more with the old Prince after that, but she did not go to see him often. She resented his treatment of her bitterly. To speak as if she were merely a part of Ostermann! It was too much!

CHAPTER XV

Marfa's Steward

IT was one of Marfa's cousins who was responsible for breaking the temporary calm in her house. When Catherine died, and was succeeded by the boy Grand Duke, Menschikoff's influence became supreme. He had always loved to display the wealth he had acquired by means sometimes dubious; but the memory of the economical Tzar had forced Catherine to keep her favorite's extravagance in check. Now that she was gone, there was no limit to his ostentatious parade of wasteful magnificence; and the great nobles eagerly followed his example. It was a means of currying favor with the virtual ruler of Russia which was wholly to their taste.

"You do not wear enough jewels for the present mode, Marfa," said Princess Alexis one day.

"I have ordered a new necklace from the diamond merchant on the Vassili Ostrof."

"That is right. I was really afraid that

husband of yours was too great a miser to allow you the ordinary decencies of life."

"He is not a miser," Marfa answered indignantly.

"Oh!" laughed Ivan. "That's good! Why, he lives like a clerk. No one would ever guess that he had married an heiress. I don't believe he has had a new coat since Peter died, and I've never seen him wear lace or jewels."

Marfa felt unaccountably angry. She assured herself that it could not matter to her, since Ostermann was her husband only in name; but the attitude of her relations forced her to acknowledge that all his actions reflected on her position. When he had supported the Dolgoroukis in the Senate, they were more friendly to her; when he had opposed them, she was aware of a slight coldness in their manner. As long as she bore his name and lived in his house, she could not dissociate herself from him in the opinion of her world; and, as her only escape lay in imprisonment within convent walls, she was bound to submit.

Ostermann was sitting writing in his cabinet when the door leading to his wife's apartments opened suddenly, and she entered unannounced. Her eyes flashed, her cheeks were

hot with anger. He had never seen her so beautiful. Foreseeing a storm, he rose quickly, determined to take the initiative.

"May I ask to what I owe this wholly unexpected honor?"

She had paused to glance round the room that she might make the customary obeisance before the icon. There was none, a fact which added a pious horror to her wrath. The poorest peasant had a holy picture to cross himself before. Her cousins had one in every room in their palaces. Then the bare simplicity of the place struck her, reminding her of the reason of her visit.

"It is true," she began fiercely. "You do live like a clerk. They said you did, and I would not believe it."

"Pray sit down. Though I am poor, I can at least offer you a chair. You will not? Well, we shall talk just as easily standing, and possibly take less time."

His quiet every-day manner annoyed her still more.

"I have no wish to take up much of your valuable time. I suppose you save that as carefully as your money."

"Unluckily, gracious Princess, I do not have a chance of saving money. The Government of your country pays those it employs like clerks."

"You are one of them, yourself," she returned quickly. "Why don't you pay yourself better?"

"Because I have a singular prejudice against taking advantage of my position in that way."

"Every one else does."

"Exactly."

"Oh! You think yourself better than every one else, do you? Well, I am rich, and you are my husband. Why don't you spend my money?"

"I beg your pardon, most gracious lady, but I fancied that you had an objection to my claiming the rights of your husband."

She flushed hotly under his glance. He had a wonderful power to annoy her.

"Still, I told you that if you acted as my steward you might use the money as you thought fit"

"I also had the honor to reply that I did not take pay for managing my wife's affairs."

"But if I do not choose to acknowledge you as my husband?"

"That makes no difference, I am afraid. The fact of our marriage remains unaltered."

An idea struck her; and turning abruptly, she left the room. She would try if she could not end this intolerable position. He was her steward. He had not taken pay, but he might not refuse it. She was accustomed to paying for her servants. As she would not employ any of

her own serfs, she had to hire others. The large colony of foreigners in the new capital made that easy. The great landowners were always ready to supply the labor required; and there were Swedish prisoners, who lingered on in the place of their former captivity, and free peasants from Finland, to be had as well.

Marfa ran through the adjoining rooms, unlocked her jewel-case, and took out the money she was keeping for the diamond merchant. It was an extravagant valuation of the services of a steward; but then he was nominally her husband. Back she came, running quickly that she might have no further time to think. She found Ostermann at work again—he had snatched up his pen as the door opened—and, coming up to him, she threw down the gold on the table.

For one moment his face frightened her. She felt a thrill of expectation that was almost pleasure. Anger and pride were not serf-like qualities; they were, therefore, virtues in her eyes. But his expression changed. She was not sure whether it had not been merely the effect of the light, after all. Very calmly he stretched out his hand, took the money, counted it deliberately, and put it into his pocket.

"Thanks, generous lady, for your charity. I accept it as your steward."

She left him without a word. The laugh she tried to force would not come. He should not see her tears. Oh! Why was she married to such a man? Did any woman in Russia suffer such shame? He was wholly contemptible, with less spirit than the most abject slave. But the next day she had a surprise, which displeased her as much. The Governors of the Foundling Hospital called, and overwhelmed her with thanks for her lavish munificence to their ill-supported charity.

Aunt Tatiana retired to bed with a slight attack of fever, and Marfa dined alone with Ostermann that evening. For once she restrained herself until the servants were gone. The story could not be told before them, or they might all send their wages to the nearest charity in her name. At last, however, she was able to speak.

"How dare you send my money to the Foundling Hospital?"

Ostermann looked up quietly. He could have avoided this scene, but he had not chosen to do so. It pleased him to watch her when she looked like that. Certainly she was becoming one of the beauties of the capital. Russian women were much admired by the foreigners, except for the quantities of paint with which they smeared their faces. Marfa's skin was

naturally fair; in spite of her dark hair she had no drop of Tartar blood: so she used no cosmetics.

"Why don't you answer?" she asked. "Are you afraid? Did you wish to conceal what you have done?"

"No. I asked the Governor to thank you in person, that you might know what a deserving charity you had assisted."

"But the money was yours."

"You said just now that it was your own."

"Well, I had given it to you."

"I accepted it only as your steward."

"Then you should have kept it."

"I do not see the necessity. If it was mine, I could surely do what I liked with it. If it was yours, given in charity, what institution could be more deserving of your support?"

She stamped her foot with rage.

"How dare you argue with me? Don't you know that I look upon you only as a serf?"

"You make that quite clear," he retorted; then resumed, speaking slowly, "I think you need a lesson in manners, my child. You might copy mine. I look upon you only as a Russian noble, yet I always try to be polite."

"What do you mean?" she asked, unable to believe her ears.

"Well, if you consider the question for a moment, you will see for yourself. Prince

Galitzin has probably told you his opinion of your class; and I have the honor to share it."

"His opinion? That the nobles should rule as they do in Sweden?"

"No. That is his dream, not his sober conviction. He knows well enough that the country could not have a worse fate than to fall under the sway of its great nobles. With perhaps two exceptions, they are petty-minded, self-seeking, and arrogant. They cringe to those above them, and bully those beneath. Heaven help the land they govern!"

"You despise us!" Marfa asked incredulously.

"Despise is a harsh word, but you have chosen it."

She sat staring at him in absolute wonder. This was the man she had imagined humble and spiritless. Well! He had deceived her, but that only made him more like a peasant. He dared to insult her class! She would punish him if she could.

"You are angry, Princess. Yet you might look on it in a more pleasing light. If birth makes no difference, then every man is free to rise or fall as he pleases, and men like your old cousin deserve more admiration for having risen above the level of their order."

"A noble is always free," Marfa answered hotly.

"Nominally; but in reality most of them are slaves."

"Slaves!"

She laughed scornfully. This man must be mad.

"Yes, in the worst kind of bondage. If a man be born a peasant, he is, at least, master of his own mind. He can make himself great, in riches like the Demidoffs, in power like Menschikoff, in philosophy like Æsop."

Marfa remembered that the last mentioned was not one of the latest ornaments of the Court.

"And a man born in a great position has further to fall. The meanest serf remains what he was born, brutal and ignorant; but his master sinks lower when he becomes the slave of his own passions."

Marfa rose, unable to bear more of such wholly seditious talk. It seemed to her this man was dangerous and would turn the world upside down.

"I must go to my aunt," she murmured to cover her flight.

And Ostermann smiled to himself at the effect of his words: to him they were merely well-worn platitudes.

CHAPTER XVI

Petrushka

FOR the next few days Marfa saw little of her husband. The young Tzar had ordered his tutor to move into rooms near his in the Palace, and Marfa was busy making the change. She half regretted leaving the Foreign Office. Her view over the river was exchanged for a window into a dark courtyard; and that was not the worst. She grew aware that the boy autocrat was likely to increase the pride she had discovered so unexpectedly in Ostermann. He had shown her that he thought himself her equal; and Peter, the hope of the reactionary party, lavished a passionate devotion upon him that must add to his self-esteem.

"It was hard on me to have to move while I was ill," said Aunt Tatiana complacently, as she lay in bed surrounded by her friends; "but I do not grudge the exertion. It is a pleasure to be so near the son of the holy martyr, Alexis."

The good lady always spoke so of the Tzar's father in public. She was known to have been

one of his adherents, so for her own sake she glorified his cause. In private, she had admitted to Marfa that he was a drunken brute, who kicked his wife and cared for nothing but the lowest forms of pleasure. However, his hatred of his father had won him the adhesion of the Orthodox; and his son benefited by it.

"Indeed, Tatiana Gregorievna, it must be a great joy. And you are so highly favored. I hear that our most noble Tzar is a frequent visitor to your apartments."

Marfa remembered a white-robed figure, with sleepy eyes, flying along the passage to Ostermann's room. She had seen it that very morning when she rose early for a sail.

"Yes," Princess Alexis joined in, "my Ivan tells me that the moment His Majesty wakes, he scrambles out of bed and goes straight to his tutor."

"Ah! What a fortunate woman you are, Marfa Ivanovna!" sighed one of the company enviously. No one could have a better chance of getting all she desired.

"I have a son who wants a commission in the Preobajinsky Guards," began another, but Marfa gave no encouragement.

"My husband makes a point of never asking favors from his pupil," she said hastily.

The women looked at each other, smiling incredulously. They knew Court life too well to believe that. How ill-natured Marfa was! It would be doing her a kindness to check her growing arrogance.

"It seems almost like witchcraft," one suggested. "No Romanoff ever showed such affection for a tutor."

"We could not be too thankful that he shows such a noble willingness to listen to counsel, if the counselor were more Orthodox."

A sigh that was almost a groan ran through the assembly, and pious eyes were upturned.

"Count Ostermann belongs to the Greek Church," Marfa threw in.

"Nominally, little cousin," answered Princess Alexis spitefully. "But you know how great a difference there may be between his nominal and his real position."

Marfa made a silent vow to be more cautious for the future. She did not like her private affairs to be speculated upon by such gossips.

When they met at supper, Ostermann expressed sincere regret at Aunt Tatiana's continued absence. He saw by his wife's face that he had nothing pleasant to expect, and he was too tired that evening to enjoy a quarrel.

"I wish you were not the Tzar's governor,"

she began. "It is not right for the ruler of Russia to submit to a foreigner."

"General Hannibal, who teaches him mathematics, is a black man."

"What does that matter? He is not the boy's governor as you are."

"Well, you may make your mind easy about that. The Tzar has sufficient flatterers to tell him of his importance and the uselessness of learning. He is not likely to remain submissive much longer."

There was a tone of discouragement in the Minister's voice which touched Marfa. He looked so wearied and overworked that she had to speak fiercely to hide the pity which threatened to make her forget the mission she had chosen.

"Those who speak to him in that way are right. The Tzar ought not learn from you. How can you know what a great Prince should be taught? Is there no Orthodox noble who could act as his governor?"

"Do you think there is, Marfa?"

He had never called her by her name before, and the sound of it thrilled her.

"You remember what I said the other day about the Russian nobles. Have you proved it false?"

"You did not say they were all bad. You must admit that a few are as honest as yourself."

Her voice was almost pleading. She could not bear that the man she despised should condemn her equals.

"Some are honest, but they have already won all they wanted. The post I hold brings no honor great enough to tempt a Galitzin or a Dolgorouki. The boy is spoilt, proud, impatient of control. His tutor's influence is not likely to survive his majority. Who would care to risk their own future for present anxieties? What would they gain?"

"Why do you do it, then?"

"I have less to lose than they, and the future interests me."

"The future? But you said your influence would not last."

Ostermann almost laughed. He could not expect Marfa to understand his interest in the future of Russia.

"I meant something else, but that doesn't matter. What I was going to say was: I want your help—for the boy's sake. He learns nothing you need object to from me; and he must be taught to govern himself before he is fit to govern the Empire. Let him learn what makes the greatness of kings, through reading their lives; and how to make his people happy, by studying the history of other nations."

"And how will you teach him religion?"

Marfa persisted. She remembered the walls bare of holy pictures.

"I leave that to the Metropolitan—or the Bishop of Voroneja," he added lightly.

Marfa was silenced. The reverend prelate referred to had begun his career as a thief. He was a noble, so was allowed to hide his shame in a monastery.

"You have a great deal of power, and the future lies partly in your hands, Marfa. Will you help or hinder my work?"

"If you really cared for him, you would save him from being forced to marry the daughter of that vulgar upstart, Menschikoff," she said hastily. Something in his voice made her afraid of what he might say next.

"Why should I?" he answered, indifferently. He wanted to speak about something else, and the new subject she was starting made it more difficult.

"Because they will both be miserable. She is years older than he is."

"Marriage means very little to a man," he returned absently. "She will probably suffer most, poor girl!"

"Why should she? She is quite as capable of injuring him."

Ostermann saw he was making her angry, and tried to soothe her.

"No, in that position she could do very little to hurt him; and he would make her suffer without meaning it." Then he added, half to himself: "Probably the woman always has most to endure in such a marriage."

Marfa's temper flared up. Did he mean to imply that she had anything to endure in their marriage? Did he dare to suggest pity for her? If he had pleaded for himself, it would have been different. She might have stooped from her proud position to show mercy to him; but now—He had crossed the room to her side and was standing looking down at her.

"Will you not be friends, Marfiushka? You can do no good to yourself by quarreling with me. Our marriage can't be dissolved."

She sprang to her feet, and drew herself up proudly. Their eyes were almost on a level.

"Friendship can only exist between equals," she answered haughtily; "and I deny the equality."

Before he could reply, the door burst open, and in rushed a tall, handsome, curly-haired boy.

"Dear Andrei Ivanovitch! You must forgive me for being cross to you to-day. I cannot sleep until you do!"

Ostermann's face changed. His wife had never known that his eyes could look so tender, or that he had so beautiful a smile.

"Your Majesty—"

"No! I won't be called bad names now. I tell you, I'm sorry."

"Petrushka—"

"That's right, friend of my heart. I always feel that you despise me when you speak formally. You say 'Your Majesty' to make me feel that, though I am the Tzar, I am only an ignorant savage with no self-control; but you love 'Petrushka,' don't you, little father?"

"I love the Tzar, too, my Petrushka."

"Oh no! Not as much as the others do who want to get something out of him. You serve him from duty. How I hate that word! I should hate you for using it so often, if you didn't love me a little—though not half as much as I love you. Are you here, Marfa Ivanovna? I didn't notice you before. What a lucky woman you are to have my little father always near you. No one tries to make you quarrel with him, and he need never be stiff with you. He has not got to stop to think of 'etiquette' before he says he loves you, or to remind you of the 'duties' of your position when you only want to please him."

Marfa avoided meeting her husband's eyes. She was sure he was smiling that slightly mocking smile of his. Curtseying low, she excused herself on the plea of her aunt's illness. It had served her once before.

CHAPTER XVII

Like the Waves of the Sea

THE next few weeks were stormy at Court. Petrushka freed himself from the yoke of the overbearing upstart, broke off his engagement to Menschikoff's daughter, sent the whole family to Siberia, and threw himself fervently into the arms of the oldest, proudest, most reactionary families in Russia.

"I will not be bullied and insulted by a man my grandfather raised from the gutter," he explained. "He dared to seize the presents I gave to my sister Natalia. It was insufferable! You all domineer over me because I am young; but I will teach you that I am the Tzar."

"Take care, Your Majesty! The man who boasts of being his own master generally ends by being his own slave."

The boy frowned.

"I won't be preached to, Andrei Ivanovitch! You never bully as the others do, but I don't like you to scold me any better. It is easy to see that you are a Pope's son, by the length of your sermons. But you are unfair in giving

them every day, for I'm sure your father only entered his pulpit once a week."

Ostermann sighed. The Dolgorouki influence was making his pupil more and more difficult to manage.

"Dear little father! Forgive me! I would do anything to please you, except learn all the dull lessons you set me. Four hours every day Just think of it, friend of my heart! Did you ever work so hard yourself?"

His tutor laughed.

"It seems little enough to me, Petrushka." Then he added gravely: "You hate being scolded; but if I did not remind you now and then that it is your duty to learn, you would cut off my head later for having neglected to teach you all that a great Emperor should know."

"Never, Andreyushka! I will always love you. But you must not be too hard on me. Sometimes you are so far away that I feel as if there were thick walls of ice between us. I cannot bear that!"

In spite of bursts of affectionate remorse on the boy's part, the Dolgoroukis gained ground. Marfa was pleased. All the world would see the difference between her cousins and an upstart like Menschikoff. Most of all, she longed to hear her husband acknowledge their power and capacity for rule. She listened more devoutly than

ever to old Galitzin's dream of an aristocratic government for Russia. It was growing nearer to realization. It seemed at times as if there would be no obstacle except the will of the Foreign Minister, whose influence with the boy sovereign was dwindling day by day. If it came to a struggle between Count Ostermann and his colleagues, Marfa felt that she could pity the conquered. It was impossible to doubt which would be the victor. There was no comparison between the splendid-looking men who represented the great families, and the small, slight, delicate foreigner who embodied the late Tzar's views.

The next event was the Coronation at Moscow. Peter the Second entered his old capital in state, followed by a brilliant train of magnificently dressed nobles. Ostermann sat beside his pupil as they drove through the gates, but he was hardly noticed by the crowd. Every one felt that another step had been taken on the road leading back to the old order of things. Once inside the white walls of the Holy City, its spell must work on the Court. Petrushka fell an instant captive to the charm. What a contrast between this beautiful town and Saint Petersburg, where everything spoke of duty and effort! The palaces on those hateful marshes were mere fortresses, ready in case the Swedes made an

attack by land or water. The courtiers were obliged to drill with the soldiers. Everywhere were signs of preparation for war.

Here all was peaceful. Moscow stretched for miles over gently rising country. The town was gay with gardens, and green with shady woods; churches and houses blazed with gaudy colors. Golden cupolas surmounted green roofs whose curved eaves gave some protection to the gorgeous paintings on the outer walls. Here were no sacrilegious statues—abominable idols, in the eyes of the Orthodox: every niche contained a sacred picture for men to worship without peril to their souls.

"Peter Alexievitch is well content with his old capital," announced Princess Dolgorouki. Her son Ivan was sole favorite and confidant; so his mother spoke with authority.

"Then we are not likely to have to endure that long journey back," commented Aunt Tatiana, well pleased.

"I hope not. The air of Moscow is so much softer than that of Saint Petersburg. I am sure it must be beneficial to your health."

Marfa raised her eyes. There was a tone in her cousin's voice which sounded charged with meaning. She left the room with her a few minutes later, and was not surprised at being stopped in the passage.

"I must have a few words alone with you, dear Marfa."

"Certainly. Will you come in here?"

She opened the door as she spoke, and ushered her guest into a small boudoir, furnished richly in the fashion of bygone days.

"Ah! The Tzar has given you Empress Marfa's apartments! Then he still treats Count Ostermann as a great personage."

"Why? What do you mean?" asked Marfa, puzzled.

"I mean that as this suite was inhabited by the widow of Tzar Feodore, it is a sign of high favor to give it to a clerk."

"My husband is Vice-Chancellor and the Tzar's tutor."

"Now do not be angry about nothing, little cousin! I do not wish to annoy you; but there is no blinking certain facts. You were married against your will to a low-born favorite of the tyrant who murdered our sainted Alexis. Would you not like to be free?"

Marfa flushed angrily. She did not choose to discuss that question with Princess Dolgorouki.

"A Russian woman is always faithful to her husband, Olga Mikhailovna," she answered coldly.

"Don't be a fool! The question is, are you

willing to go with him to Siberia? He is in our way, and must either yield or fall. If you help us, you shall be safe, and we shall see that you make a suitable marriage as soon as you are free. If you don't help us, you must share his fate."

Marfa drew herself up proudly.

"I am no traitor. I would never help to ruin the man whose name I bear!"

"How silly and romantic that sounds! Well, don't look to us, then, to save you. The road to Siberia is long, and the Menschikoff woman had time to weep herself blind on the way."

"The Menschikoff woman"! And Princess Alexis had cringed to her as humbly as her husband had to the fallen favorite! Marfa was suddenly disgusted with her cousins. But she feared them. The idea of Siberia was horrible to her. The stories that were told of the terrible journey haunted her. She would not betray Ostermann, but she prayed that he might yield.

"Do you think the present Government very bad?" she inquired wistfully, when she found herself alone with him.

He looked up sharply; but he replied by a question.

"What have I to do with the internal affairs of His Majesty's Empire?"

"You will not answer, because you do not trust me," she returned bitterly.

It was unjust to treat her so, when she was risking all for him!

"Why should I say harsh things of your kinsfolk? Are they not too high above me to be judged by my low standard?"

"That means that you despise them. Yet you would gain more by being friends with them."

"May I remind you of your own assertion, Princess, that friendship is only possible between equals? Such haughty princes as your cousins have nothing in common with a paid servant of the Tzar."

"I wish you would try to please them. If they ruined you, they would send you to Siberia, and I could not bear that!"

"Why should you care?" he asked calmly, but he waited for her answer with a strange anxiety.

"Because I should loathe it. The cold and loneliness would kill me."

"Oh! You are afraid that you would be sent there, too. You may make your mind easy on that point. The Tzar is very merciful, and would never commit such a cruel injustice."

Marfa had failed, and her life grew more

desolate. She held aloof from the Dolgoroukis out of a proud determination to do nothing to hasten her husband's downfall; but she was miserably conscious that he regarded her as entirely on their side. She was cut off from all her natural interests, Lindsay had not come back, she longed for something to take her out of herself.

So it chanced that she found herself with the crowd flocking into one of the numerous churches of the sacred city to hear the strange monk the Dolgoroukis had discovered. They were putting forward one of themselves, Prince Jacob Petrovitch, as Patriarch, and were seeking everywhere for allies against the powerful Metropolitan, Feofan Procopovitch, who had sworn to his late master that the Patriarchate should never be restored. They had heard of this wild hermit, and had brought him from afar to rouse the people against the present order of things.

From the first moment Marfa was impressed. Politically, this man might be a puppet in the hands of those wilier than himself, but personally no one could doubt his earnestness. He was a tall man with long, black hair—no elaborately curled wig, such as the courtiers wore, but rough tangled locks falling over his shoulders and mingling with his flowing beard.

His face was gaunt with the severity of his self-inflicted privations, and his sunken eyes glowed in their deep hollows like flaming torches half hidden in caves. His hoarse voice echoed through the vast building with the sound of a trumpet.

Marfa was longing for warmth and color in her life. This man's words thrilled through her till her heart grew hot, and her eyes felt dazzled. Religion was no mere question of forms and ceremonies to him, but a vital force, coming like the wind no man could tell whence, seizing the souls of men in its resistless power, and sweeping them onwards as leaves before a gale. He had come, he said, to the Holy City, and he found it a den of iniquity. They had forsaken the right way and followed after strange gods. The tutor of the most Orthodox Tzar was a heathen who worshiped only the idols he called Progress and Civilization. The Dolgoroukis smiled as they watched the horror-struck faces of the congregation. But that was not the worst. The sins of the foreigner could not harm the true believers, if they were pure in heart. It was not those who were without the fold who mattered; it was the corruption of those within.

He then denounced the splendors of the new ritual: the gold and jewels heaped on

the altars by men whose hearts were far from the truth; the singing men who chanted the words their fathers were accustomed to hear spoken in tones of sincere reverence; the gorgeous robes worn by the priests, according to the design of the heretical Patriarch Nicon; and, finally, he denounced the ambitious worldliness of Feofan Procopovitch himself.

Marfa went home in a state of great excitement. Her mind was full of the new ideas suggested by the preacher. He had put life into a religion which had hitherto been merely a formal observance of certain regulations. Lent, for instance, was a terrible annoyance to the average man of the world, yet he never dreamed of not fasting rigorously. It was the custom, and must be done. But this monk would make a glorious privilege of such privation. He looked at everything from a totally different standpoint.

"The Duke of Liria and the Jesuits are clever," commented Ostermann, as Marfa praised the wonderful monk. "They have won a trick; but the game is not over. Wait and see what will happen."

The words annoyed Marfa. Every one knew that the Dolgoroukis were mixed up with the Jesuits; but no one spoke of that. The Roman Church was abhorrent to the Russians, for it

reminded them of their sufferings under the hateful Polish yoke. "Better a Tartar khan than a Polish general," said the poor people. If the Jesuits gained ground, they might induce the Poles to invade Russia once more. Educated men knew that was impossible. Their once powerful neighbor was sinking too rapidly for that. But they distrusted Rome, none the less.

Marfa went again to hear the monk. This time he was weary and discouraged. He had grown aware of the intrigues around him, of the secret vices underlying the apparent devoutness of the reactionary leaders, of the hollowness of the prosperity around him. Feofan Procopovitch had confessed his sins humbly to the holy hermit. It was remarkable how closely they were entangled with those of his rivals.

Instead of denouncing the enemies of the Dolgoroukis, Brother Ilarion urged them to repentance themselves. He revealed their own sins of self-seeking ambition, self-indulgence, indifference to everything that did not personally affect them. Then he spoke of the wonderful visions he had had, of the happiness awaiting those who maintained their faith pure and unblemished. "Oh! If thou wilt hearken to the Commandments of the Church, then shall thy peace be like a river, and thy righteousness like the waves of the sea." Much more he said, to

make symbolical use of the text; but Marfa heard him not. The words had awakened a fierce longing within her for the waters of the bay of Cronstadt, and the strong, salt breeze. She hated Moscow now! The very air was foul with wickedness. Treachery and intrigue surrounded her. The latest development was the split among the Dolgoroukis. Ivan and his father were jealous of each other, and Prince Alexis was ready to sacrifice his son at any moment to increase his own power. It was true what the monk said. They sought only their own personal profit. Even old Prince Galitzin was angry with them for their neglect of State affairs. The army was ill equipped, the navy was totally unprovided with the bare necessities of its existence. Yet the favorites did not care, as long as Ivan had new jewels, and his father got fresh forests for hunting, and more serfs to look after his horses or dogs.

There was, besides, a subtle corruption in the new Court that sickened Marfa more than the brutal violence of the old. She was afraid when she heard the laughter of the gossips over some fresh scandal; and she shuddered when she remembered the history of the Kremlin. It reeked with crimes of all sorts. The darkness of its narrow tortuous passages appeared to her imagination as a terrible symbol.

The peace of the river had no attraction for Marfa, if it meant lingering on the banks of the Moskva. She preferred the stormy struggle after righteousness in the wind-swept Northern capital.

CHAPTER XVIII

Marfa's Essay in Humility

THE monk disappeared. His first sermon had hit the Metropolitan very hard; the second displeased the Dolgoroukis. There were a great number of interesting topics to discuss; political intrigues and much scandal. The hermit was quickly forgotten. Marfa, almost alone of all his crowded congregation, remembered him. His words had made more than a passing impression on her mind, they had given her a new standard. As a Russian, she was inclined to judge a man by his possessions; then came Mistress Christian with her Scotch pride of birth; after that Ostermann's influence made her realize that intellect counted for most as the element of greatness; now this ignorant peasant preacher taught her that soul was the only fixed measure. Everything else changed in value, but the things of the spirit were permanent realities.

Marfa's life had contributed to make such a view easy of acceptance. She was very young, yet she had seen great changes in the sphere of politics, as well as in her own personal surround-

ings. The splendor of Prince Menschikoff faded in a day under the coldness of a boy of twelve. He rose from poverty, she knew him at the height of his power; and now, in his old age, he was working with his hands to supply the barest necessities for his family. Truly the glory of the world was but a swiftly passing shadow!

For some time she lived in a sort of glorious dream, indifferent to all the common, sordid things around her. It was Lent; and the rigorous fast affected her. She was weak in body, and her mental fervor grew greater every day. Her aunt and Ostermann were alike anxious about her health.

"Religion should be left to the priests," grumbled Tatiana Gregorievna. "It is their business to see that we get to heaven. There is really no need for us to trouble ourselves."

Marfa took no notice. Her aunt was little better than her husband. The presence of holy pictures on the wall was of little avail if the soul were not filled with sacred images. Who could leave religious questions to the priests, when they were such men as the worldly and learned Feofan Procopovitch—a scheming politician, a proud Prince of the Church; or, worse still, like the Bishop of Voroneja, the ignorant noble who had been a thief? The mood lasted until Easter.

Then she met Ostermann in the narrow passage of their apartment. He held a beautifully carved ivory egg in his hand, and offered it to her with the customary greeting:

"Christ is risen."

"He is risen indeed," she answered, accepting his gift with some reluctance, but submitting to his kiss. Not even an Empress could refuse such a salutation from a peasant, but the touch of Ostermann's lips thrilled Marfa with a new sensation.

For the next few days, Marfa devoted herself to trying to convert her impassive husband to her new-found faith. She half hoped to anger him. In her present mood she would have welcomed martyrdom, and gloried in any attempt at persecution. She envied the saints who had suffered terrible deaths. It was easier to die for a religion than to live worthy of it. But her efforts were wasted on Ostermann, and soon the arrival of Lindsay in the old capital gave a new turn to her thoughts. He had been promoted unexpectedly, and given a commission in the Emperor's body-guard. That was the doing of Princess Alexis, but she claimed no credit for it. Her last interview with her young cousin had made her more cautious.

"I am glad to see you again!" Marfa exclaimed impulsively.

Lindsay looked at her and realized that the friendly child had become a very beautiful woman. The shock of the surprise confused him, and his answer sounded cold.

"You remind me of dear Saint Petersburg—I have grown so tired of Moscow! Do you remember that day on the sea?"

"Can I ever forget it, Countess?"

His tone was warm enough now.

"Was it then that you told me about Mistress Christian's brother? Do you ever hear of him now?"

"Yes. By an odd chance I had news of him just before leaving Astrakhan. One of the officers there was a brother of Madame, and Patrick wrote to announce her death. I think he expected Ioussoupoff to do something for that lame girl of his. But he is as poor as a church mouse himself, and doesn't see the fun of taking the burden of other people's families on his shoulders."

"Oh! What luck for me! You know I have always wanted to have her. Now I can arrange it."

"I am afraid not. Nadejda is very obstinate. She would not leave her father."

"But you said he wrote to her uncle as if he wished to part with her."

"I did not mean that. He merely hoped

to persuade his wife's family to send money for her support."

"He must be very ignorant of Russian customs! We would never do such a thing. Our poor relations are always welcome to live with us, and we would share our last crust with them; but hardly any of us could afford to send money."

She sat thinking, with a little pucker between her brows. Lindsay stood by, watching her admiringly.

"How handsome she is!" he thought. "She is quite unlike the coarsely painted women one sees everywhere in Russia."

"Well? What shall I do?" Marfa asked impatiently.

What was the use of staring at her in silence?

"Do? About what, Princess?"

He slipped back into the old mode of address. It was impossible to remember that she was Count Ostermann's wife. He was thinking that the lines of her mouth were as perfect when she spoke as in repose.

"About Nadejda, of course. We were talking of nothing else."

"I beg your pardon; I forgot."

"Well?"

The little pucker became a frown. Clearly he must make an effort, or he would fall into disgrace.

"There is nothing to be done; unless Patrick could return to Russia," he added as a brilliant afterthought.

"That's the very thing! How clever of you, Mr. Lindsay! I will ask Count Ostermann to get him recalled and given a good place somewhere. It should not be difficult. Jacobites are in favor just now."

Then she grew grave. It was a serious matter—asking a favor from her husband. She had hesitated before when it might have seemed a trifle to him. Now his influence had waned until it was possible that the slightest request might jeopardize all that remained. If she asked him to venture so much, she must do so very humbly, and humility was not a virtue she had ever practised. The thought of her new faith came to her aid. Here was a chance of sacrificing something to prove that she was really changed by it.

"What are you thinking of, Marfa?" asked Aunt Tatiana that night as they sat at supper. "You look like a martyr going to the stake."

"I was wondering how to get something I want."

"A new wonder-working hermit has arrived from Archangel," suggested Ostermann.

Marfa looked at him quickly. Was he laugh-

ing at her? Who could tell, when his face was like a mask?

"It is only the Emperor who can grant my petition," she answered.

"Have you lost faith in the Powers above?"

Aunt Tatiana crossed herself: Andrei should be more careful. It was all very well not to worry the blessed saints with needless prayers, but no one should speak of them lightly. Their displeasure was like that of an Autocrat: it involved the family of the offender in his ruin.

"No," Marfa returned curtly. Then she remembered her newly formed resolution. "I want to ask you a very great favor, Andrei Ivanovitch."

"You said that it was the Tzar you wished to approach."

"Will you speak to him for me?"

"I am not a Dolgorouki. Why not ask one of them?"

"Because I will not stoop to ask a favor from those I despise," she answered with a flash of angry pride.

Ostermann smiled, a slow, amused smile, glancing from his wife to her aunt and back again. In the presence of a third person, he would not remind Marfa, by words, that she despised him also. His smile was enough.

"They are your cousins," he said gently.

"They are unprincipled, self-seeking, and capable of any villainy."

"It is not wise to speak so loudly of men in power," he remonstrated.

"I am not afraid," she retorted with a contemptuous glance.

"Evidently not. Perhaps because your risk is small."

"They would punish me if they dared."

"But since they will not dare—" He broke off, shrugging his shoulders.

"I beg your pardon," she said humbly.

It was true. The Dolgoroukis were not likely to carry out their threat of sending her to Siberia; and as she would remain in safety, she must take extra care not to precipitate her husband's fate.

"After all, no one says anything against Princess Catherine," he suggested.

"Oh! Katia can have no influence at Court. She is so madly in love with that German!"

"Still, as the future Empress—"

"What? They would never dare to marry her to that boy?"

"Prince Menschikoff betrothed him last year to his daughter."

"Yes, but he was a peasant, eager to ally

himself with the Romanoffs. The Dolgoroukis are descendants of Rurik. They could claim the throne themselves if they chose. What can tempt them to such a horrible thing?"

"The Tzar's brother-in-law is more likely to keep in power than his favorite. The Tzaritza's family would, at all events, escape Siberia."

"But all the world knows that Katia is in love with some one else, and her father had consented to the marriage!"

"Hearts count for little in politics. Even a Tzar cannot hope for love."

"You talk like a foolish child, Marfa," interposed her aunt. "In my youth we never dreamed of anything so unmaidenly as love before marriage. It should come afterwards, as you experience the kindness of your husband."

"Marfa looks at marriage from a new point of view, Tatiana Gregorievna," said Ostermann, with the smile that always irritated his wife.

"Ah! These new ideas have much to answer for, Andrei Ivanovitch. Women were wiser when they accepted a husband meekly from their father's hand, and were content to look on at life through a thick veil. The man was the real head of the house then. His word was law, and his wife was lucky if she es-

caped beatings. Now women flaunt about with uncovered faces, and get their heads turned by the idle compliments of worthless young men whose flattery is only skin-deep. A man's praise is not worth having if he judges only by the shape of the nose or the color of the eyes; yet the silly creatures swallow it all, and ruin themselves, body and soul, for a lazy gallant who does not value them as much as a dog."

"You think that women can't resist temptation? Well, you may be right. You must know your own sex best."

Marfa listened in haughty silence. She regretted having humbled herself before this man who despised women. He was weak, cowardly, effeminate, just the type of man who would scorn them. It was the only way he could prove his manhood. She had noticed that a peasant master was most cruel to his fellow serfs, a half-bred Russian most eager to claim foreign birth and show contempt for his countrymen. The smaller the actual difference, the more bitter is the feeling of those who wish to mark it.

CHAPTER XIX

A Human Sacrifice

LINDSAY, meantime, had the good fortune to save Prince Ivan from the charge of a savage wild boar. The young favorite was all-powerful: the Scotchman might ask what he would. For a moment his ambition suggested dazzling possibilities; then he thought of Marfa and Nadejda. The beautiful Russian would be grateful if he obtained the recall of the Gordons, and her gratitude might make her kind. Besides, he recollected Nadejda as a gay, active child, whose quaint foreign ways charmed all who knew her; and he had seen her smiling bravely, as a woman, at poverty and misfortune. His choice was made.

"Is there any courier going to Leipsic who could take a letter for me to my friends?" Marfa asked, a few days later.

Ostermann put aside his work to consider the question. Aunt Tatiana had told him enough about Mistress Christian to make the position clear. He understood now his wife's hatred of the serfs, and was sorry for her.

"I could send Ilja if you wished it."

"Your own man! That is kind of you."

"We could not trust an ordinary messenger. The Gordons are very poor, and you probably intend to send money for their traveling expenses."

"I had not thought of that," Marfa murmured, ashamed of her stupidity.

"Mademoiselle would forgive you for venturing to offer a loan to be repaid at her father's convenience."

"And Ilja is very honest; he is like Mikhail, who had charge of my brothers when they went abroad."

She sighed as she remembered how long ago that was. Vladimir wrote sometimes from France, but never mentioned returning to his own country, while Pavel sent rare letters from the different Universities where he was studying —Heidelberg, Leipsic, Leyden, Oxford—full of philosophy, with no hint of homesickness.

Ilja started just before the public betrothal of the boy Tzar to the eighteen-year-old Katia. The ceremony was attended with much outward pomp and splendor. The diplomatic body, the nobles, every member of the Imperial family, were assembled in the palace to witness the arrival of the bride. Even the unfortunate Eudoxia, rescued by her grandson after a

quarter of a century of imprisonment in a convent, came to give her blessing to the future Empress. Beside her was the daughter of her successor, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, angry at the marriage, yet compelled to submit. The great hall, crowded by men in splendid uniforms and women in gorgeous dresses, presented a magnificent effect.

But the guests whispered to each other that it was evident the Dolgoroukis were not at ease. Prince Ivan had filled the palace with troops, giving the order without the knowledge of his cousin the Field Marshal. At the gates, an accident evoked superstitious mutterings among the crowd. The crown over the doorway fell as the bride's carriage drove up. She entered pale and sullen-looking. Her hand was icy cold as it met her bridegroom's. Peter seemed scarcely happier. He turned his head aside from time to time, seeking comfort from his tutor, who stood near him; and Marfa felt a lump in her throat when she met his eyes. She knew how he had been tricked into this marriage, which he hated as much as his bride appeared to do. He was persuaded his honor was involved, so made the sacrifice.

Feofan Procopovitch performed the service impassively. It was the second in which the boy Sovereign had taken the part of bridegroom.

His first betrothed was now in Siberia with her family. Who could say that Princess Katia would be more fortunate? Yet he frowned once when the German lover came forward to kiss the hand which had been promised to him. Katia forgot all for a moment, snatched her other hand from Peter's, and held them both out to the man she loved. Some one tittered at the back of the hall.

"I wish I were dead!" said the little Tzar fiercely to his favorite, when they were alone that evening.

"If Your Majesty had not compromised my sister, he would not have been bound in honor to make amends," Ivan answered contemptuously.

The marriage would take place in a few weeks, and then all would be well. Nothing could shake the power of his family when Katia was Tzaritza. That meddling German, Ostermann, remonstrated against the hunting-parties which wore out the boy's strength, interfered with his education, and made him a stranger to his capital; but neither Ivan nor his father cared. If Peter died, as his sister Natalia had recently done, it would be so much the better. Katia would be Empress Catherine the Second, and her brother would rule the Empire. Yet Ivan had no wish to kill his boy friend, and was

anxious when Peter fell ill a few days before the date fixed for the wedding.

"It is smallpox," the doctors pronounced.

"Is there any danger?" asked Prince Alexis.

"There is always danger with such a malady," the physicians answered solemnly; "but we are devoting ourselves to him, and the resources of science are now much greater than formerly."

The rash was coming out, there was no reason to fear. But Peter was a difficult patient to manage, and before he could be prevented, he rushed to the window, flinging it open to drink in the sharp night air.

"I was being stifled," he explained when Ostermann was sent for.

"Your Majesty owed it to his subjects to endure."

"Ah! don't scold me, little father. I shall die, and all your advice will be wasted."

His tutor looked at him, but asked no question. Poor little Peter! The Tzar's crown was too heavy a burden for so young a head.

"I was bound in honor," moaned the boy, tossing restlessly; "but we shall both be free now. You will not let them force me to marry her now? Promise me that you will not leave me! I have no other friend in the world."

"Don't be afraid. I will stay with you as long as you want me; but you must do what the

doctors tell you. We all love you, my Petrushka; and it would break my heart to lose you."

"Dear Andrei! It is only you who care for me. The others can get a new Tzar who will do just as well for them."

The Dolgoroukis held council together. Prince Alexis was for marrying his daughter to the dying boy. It would secure the succession, he urged. Ivan took pity on his sister's tears, and proposed another plan.

"We don't want to kill her too. She would be sure to catch the infection if we took her to him. The simplest way is for him to leave the Crown by will."

"We can't get him to do that with Ostermann looking on."

"Who said we could? My plan is much easier than that. I can write exactly like him. You know how often I have signed things in his name when we were away on a long hunting expedition. I will forge a paper now."

"No one would believe in such a document," interposed Prince Vassili Loukitch, their cousin. "It would only do us harm."

"There! my idea is best. I shall take Catherine to his room at once. He is still conscious."

"I don't like that scheme much better," objected Vassili.

"Oh! I suppose you wish to take the other side."

"No, I was going to say we might do without either; for the Danish Ambassador hints that his master would support us. He doesn't want Elizabeth, since her brother-in-law, the Duke of Holstein, is his enemy."

"And the Orthodox won't accept her because Eudoxia's divorce wasn't legal," supplied Prince Serge.

"Well, the will can be produced to make things sure," Ivan decided, and sat down, pen in hand.

At that moment the Field Marshal arrived.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

His cousins explained frankly.

"I will not have it, do you hear?" he thundered. "It is a villainy and a disgrace to dream of such a thing. Catherine hasn't any right to the throne. She isn't the Emperor's wife."

"That is what I said," Prince Alexis agreed. "She must be married to him, if possible. Still, in case that fails, she is his betrothed, and we command the Guards. You have only to give the order, and the army will support us."

"How about the Galitzins?" inquired Vassili.

"Promise the old fool his Constitution, and he will help us. If not, we must kill him."

"You talk like children! I have told you

it is a crime, but you are too idiotic to see that it is foolish as well. No one would support Katia. Who could be induced to swear allegiance to the girl? Not even your own family."

Then the old man left them, thinking in his angry scorn that the plot was done with. But the others merely shrugged their shoulders. Ivan returned to his forgery, and Prince Alexis to his plan for forcing on the marriage. Katia resisted as long as she dared. Not even for a throne would she run such a risk, but her father promised her that her German lover should be restored to her, and she gave way.

On the threshold of the Tzar's room, they were stopped by Count Ostermann.

"His Majesty sleeps," he said coolly.

"What does that matter? He must marry my daughter before he dies."

"There is no immediate danger, and he shall not be disturbed."

"How can you prevent it?" sneered the Prince.

"Mr. Lindsay has orders from your cousin, the Field Marshal, to prevent any one from entering without His Majesty's leave."

"You shall pay for this some day, you insolent clerk," Prince Alexis threatened, but Ostermann did not yield.

"Don't leave me, Andrei!" moaned the dying boy, and his tutor came back to him while Lindsay's men barred the door with their bayonets.

"I am here, Petrushka," came the soothing answer.

"Give me your hand, then, that I may keep you near me."

The Vice-Chancellor gave his hand, and sat beside the bed patiently, hour after hour, while outside his own fate hung in the balance with that of the Empire. Sometimes Peter lost consciousness, at other moments he was delirious and raved of his dead sister; but Ostermann never left him.

"Andrei, Natalia wants me. Are the sledges ready?"

"Yes, everything is ready for you to go."

"Good-by, little father. I am sorry I have been such a trouble to you. Won't you kiss me to show that you forgive?"

The doctor shook his head violently; the danger was too great. But Ostermann saw nothing save Petrushka's pleading eyes. He bent over him and kissed his lips.

"Good-by, my little son, go in peace."

CHAPTER XX

Nadejda

MOSCOW watched wakeful till a tolling bell announced that all was over. Marfa heard it, and knelt, praying with clasped hands for the soul of the handsome warm-hearted boy whose reign was so quickly ended. Then she wondered what the Ministers were doing. Where was Ostermann? She had not seen him for nearly two days. She decided contemptuously that he was at the Council, which was sitting all through the night. He was so cold, so politic, that consideration for the future would engross him more than sorrow for the loss of the boy who had loved him.

Then, having condemned him as heartless, she wandered out into the narrow, ill-lighted passage to wait for his return. He might be unhappy, and she could try to comfort him. She heard steps coming towards her, and the murmur of voices.

"No! Tell them I cannot come. I am a foreigner. It is not for me to settle who should succeed to the throne."

Osterann paused a momment under the oil lamp burning in front of a holy picture, read the note inviting his attendance at the Council, and tore it up. Marfa came slowly towards him. She noticed that he was pale and his eyes were tired.

"Stand back, Princess. The doctor said that no one ought to come near me for a time."

"Why? Have you been with—" She hesitated, unable to speak the name.

Ostermann nodded.

"You were not afraid?" she asked wonderingly. His cowardice was one of his unpardonable sins in her eyes.

"Of smallpox? No, I don't fear death."

He spoke with complete indifference. He was thinking chiefly of his desire to be alone, and the difficulty of passing her in such a narrow passage. He brought infection with him, which she must not catch.

"But why did you stay with him? There were the Dolgoroukis."

Why had they not run the risk? Was he braver, after all?

"Exactly, there were the Dolgoroukis."

"Well?"

"The boy was dying. Would you have left him to men eager to snatch his crown?"

"They would not have harmed him then."

"They would have disturbed him. They wanted him to marry Princess Catherine that she might inherit."

Marfa's eyes opened wide with horror.

"But she might have caught it too! Did they forget the risk?"

"Oh! Your cousins are brave enough. They can endure worse things than blows."

His bitterly scornful tone cut her to the quick. How he despised those whom she had fancied on a pinnacle above him! It struck her suddenly that, though every one called him a coward, no one had ever seen him cringe before the Tzar, as even the greatest nobles did. He was no Oriental to submit to personal indignities like a serf. But how did he avoid the common fate?

For the next few weeks, Ostermann kept to his own room. Marfa saw nothing of him, and heard much of his enemies. The Dolgoroukis tried to produce the forged will, but old Prince Galitzin contemptuously pronounced it a sham, and the Field Marshal supported him. The business before them was too serious to admit of trifling. Peter the Second was the last male Romanoff. The Council must choose his successor.

"We might claim the Crown for ourselves," suggested Prince Serge. "We are a better family than the Romanoffs were."

"Who would obey us now?" answered the Field Marshal angrily. "You have all behaved like fools and scoundrels. No one could expect any of you to rule worthily."

"Besides, the foreign Governments would object," said Prince Vassili.

"As if we were not free to choose for ourselves!"

"The Poles have tried that, and it ends in ruin. We don't want to have Russia invaded, especially now when the army is unprepared."

"Well, we will not have Elisavetta Petrovna."

"Serge Loukitch must be a rejected lover, from the way he hates her."

"Silence!" commanded the Field Marshal. "Prince Galitzin has a candidate to propose."

"I wish to suggest the Duchess of Courland, daughter of Tzar Ivan."

"I don't care who it is, if that German scoundrel Ostermann is sent to Siberia," grumbled Prince Alexis.

"We can't do that yet. He is the one man in Russia who understands foreign affairs. We must keep him until the question of the Succession is settled."

"No one objects to the Duchess Anna Ivanovna?" Galitzin inquired. "Then let us invite her to accept the throne on condition that she swears to give us a Constitution."

The Dolgoroukis listened to the proposed scheme for the Constitution, and assented gladly. It would mean permanent power for themselves under a puppet Empress. The paper was drawn up, signed, and taken to Count Ostermann to sign. He was ill, and would see nobody. The matter was urgent. He consented to receive a deputation, and heard the document read aloud; but he would not sign. He was quite unable to hold a pen, he told them firmly. The wiser men grew alarmed. No one could ever guess whether the Vice-Chancellor's illnesses were mental or physical. Every one knew that they occurred opportunely.

"What does it matter whether he signs or not!" exclaimed Prince Alexis impatiently. It annoyed him to see such a fuss made about a German clerk.

"If he doesn't commit himself to our side, he can act against us. He is cleverer than all of us put together, and if he warns Anne not to agree, we shall end in Siberia," Prince Galitzin prophesied gloomily.

"Well, we must prevent them from meeting. We can surround her with those loyal to our cause, and there will be no danger."

Marfa heard reports of all this, and was shocked by the attempted forgery. She grew aware of her husband's peril, if his enemies triumphed,

and realized that the Dolgorouki government would be unwelcome to the majority of the nobles. The future looked dark; but there was one bright spot in the present to comfort her. Nadejda arrived with her father.

The first sight of her guest was rather a shock to Marfa. She remembered the vivid impression Mistress Christian's beauty had produced on her mind, and was disappointed to find that the niece bore no resemblance to her aunt. Nadejda was small, very lame, though hardly perceptibly crooked. Her hair was a dull brown, her features irregular, her skin dark; it was obvious that her mother was of Tartar origin. The redeeming points of her appearance were soft brown eyes with reddish lights, and a very sweet smile. She must have been under thirty, but in repose her face looked older.

"How can I thank you for your letter, Countess?" she began; and even Aunt Tatiana grudgingly acknowledged the charm of her voice. "It was kind of you to write like that to a stranger!"

"You must not call yourself that," Marfa replied, throwing her arms around her. "Mistress Christian was a mother to me, so you are almost a cousin."

Hot tears rose to Nadejda's eyes. Affection was a very precious offering, especially from this beautiful girl in a strange land.

"Did Ilja prove useful?" Aunt Tatiana inquired.

The question sounded innocent, but it was meant to remind this foreign woman that she was here as a dependant, who had received charity in its most material form.

"Yes, Madame, he is an excellent servant. I owe you many thanks, Countess, for sending us the money for our journey; but for that, my father would have lost the chance of this appointment, as we were too poor to travel such a long way."

"It was Count Ostermann's idea," Marfa confessed honestly. "You must not call me 'Countess,' Nadejda. We are almost cousins, as I explained to you, so I am Marfa, do you hear?"

"You are too kind to me. After all, I am a stranger to you, though you loved my aunt; and you may not like me when you know me better."

"That is nonsense! I make up my mind about people the first moment I see them, and I am sure that I shall always love you. Now you are tired, so I am going to take you to bed."

She led the way out into the passage, and opened a door on the left.

"This is your room, and I hope you will be very happy in it. If we ever go back to dear

Saint Petersburg, you shall be next to me, with a balcony overhanging the water. All the rooms open out of each other there. It is not like this, where you have only one door, to diminish the danger of a night attack."

"But perhaps I shall not be still with you when you return to Saint Petersburg."

"Why not? You are going to live with me always, you know."

"Would that be right? What does Count Ostermann wish?"

"Oh! He lets me have everything my own way. Besides, he was pleased that you should come, and he lent me Ilja to send as my messenger."

"How good of him!"

Marfa drew her eyebrows together. She did not approve of the gratitude in her new friend's voice.

"Take care that you don't like him more than me, Nadia! Aunt Tatiana does, and it makes me jealous. He has bewitched her by his courteous manner. No man ever showed her half so much politeness before. She started by being just as prejudiced against him as—I mean she disliked him because he was a foreigner and one of Peter's favorites, but now she worships him and thinks he is always right."

"Isn't he?"

"What an idea! Are you going to believe in him before you have ever seen him?"

"But everybody knows him by reputation."

"You can't, because you have only just come to Russia."

"Yes, but I have heard about him for years. My father and his friends used to discuss the chances of a European war, which would give them employment, and they always spoke as if it depended on Count Ostermann—"

"I won't let you say that! Listen, my Nadejda! If you want to please me, you mustn't praise him."

Her guest looked at her in surprise. What did this mean?

"You are astonished; but don't be shocked, dear. There are lots of women here who hate their husbands."

"Poor Marfa!"

"Oh! don't pity me! I don't care. And don't waste pity on him; for he cares less. He doesn't want me to like him. He is cold, self-satisfied, and despises women. He makes me so angry that I can't speak of him."

Nadejda moved nearer and put one arm round her friend. The next minute Marfa's head was on her shoulder, and she was crying like a child.

"Nadia, you must love me. I am so lonely!

Sometimes I grow afraid that I shall do wicked things like the others for amusement. I should, if it were not for fear of his contempt; but I could not bear him to despise me, and he would say that my religion was all humbug. He believes in nothing himself."

The lame woman caressed her silently. How could she comfort her until she knew more?

"You will not leave me, dear?"

"No, I will stay as long as you have any need of me."

"Then that will be always!" Marfa raised her head, and dashed away her tears. "Isn't it lucky that I don't paint and powder as most of them do?" she remarked with a tremulous attempt at gaiety. "I should have quite spoilt your dress. Will you forgive me for being so silly? Everything has been so dreadful lately, and I longed for a friend. You know that you are that to me already; for I have known about you for years, and always wanted you."

She threw her arms round Nadejda, kissing her again with fervor.

"Good-night, my little soul! Do you like our Russian pet names? I know none in Scotch. Sleep well, and don't forget your unhappy friend."

When Nadejda was at last alone, she smiled to herself.

"I don't think her misery is likely to last. If only Count Ostermann is worthy of her, they may be very happy yet."

After that she wondered a little over the strangeness of her position. Two months ago she was almost starving; now her father had a career once more, and she had a home. It was true her Scotch caution made her slower than Marfa to believe that the future could be settled in a couple of hours; but she realized that was partly because she had never known of Countess Ostermann's existence, while she herself was regarded as almost a relation. For the rest, her life had prepared her to accept what would seem miracles to others, as mere every-day experiences.

CHAPTER XXI

Nadejda's Key

THE next day Count Ostermann appeared for the first time since the death of the young Tzar. Each of the three women noticed how ill he looked: Marfa, with secret contempt: she was inclined to despise every form of weakness, and doubted the reality of this; Nadejda gave one quick glance of silent pity; Aunt Tatiana expressed her sympathy loudly. Her fussy anxiety was trying to the sick man's nerves.

"You are too kind, Tatiana Gregorievna. Really, I am quite well."

"Is there no meeting of the Supreme Council to-day?" Marfa asked mockingly.

"No, we are waiting to know the Duchess of Courland's decision."

Marfa laughed.

"She is hardly likely to refuse a crown!"

"You think not? Women are unaccountable in their tastes. The Grand Duchess Elizabeth preferred her bed."

"What are you saying, Andrei Ivanovitch?" Aunt Tatiana asked.

"Did not you hear the story of how Dr. Lestocq woke her and begged her to proclaim herself Empress, but she would not lose her night's sleep? Perhaps she was wise."

"Well. You are a lucky man, nephew. Elisavetta Petrovna has no great love for you. Who knows what might have happened if she had been more active?"

"Who knows? But these things are on the wheel of the Fates."

Marfa's lip curled. The man was a heathen! Nadejda made a diversion.

"There is a spinet. Is His Excellency fond of music?"

Ostermann turned to her eagerly.

"Do you play, Mademoiselle?"

"A little. I learnt that instrument in the convent, where they taught me embroidery; and after we came to Germany, I met other people who were kind enough to teach me. Herr Bach—"

"You know him?"

"Yes; he showed us great kindness while we were in Leipsic."

The Vice-Chancellor looked at her with a half-envious smile.

"You use the word 'kind' very often. Have

you really found many people who deserved it?"

"Why do you doubt it, Your Excellency? I am poor."

"So am I, yet that has not proved a magic key in my case."

"Then perhaps it is because I am lame," she answered simply. Her hearers would all have shrunk from alluding to her misfortune; but to her it was a matter of course. "Yes, I think that must be it. Every one would be kind if they knew how, but they do not always realize poverty, or know how to relieve it; whereas lameness is so obvious."

"You are very fortunate, Mademoiselle!"

She smiled, and her plain face seemed to grow almost beautiful, even to his critical eyes.

"Yes, am I not? Few women have so many friends as I have, and they are all so good to me."

She looked up at Marfa as she spoke, and was instantly embraced.

"Dearest Nadejda! It is you who are kind to me."

"And that is a woman who has often not had enough to eat," thought Ostermann. "It is a strange world!"

Nadejda moved to the spinet and struck a few chords. Marfa saw her husband's ex-

pression of eager interest, and felt guilty. Once he had found her singing to her balalaika, and begged her to go on. She had refused haughtily, and he had never asked her again. Did he honestly care so much for music? she wondered. He was unconscious of her searching glances; heart and soul were absorbed in the piece Nadejda was playing. It was a prelude by her great master, grave, questioning, unanswerable, perhaps. When it was done, he pleaded for another. This time the treble was rippling with light mirth, while the bass muttered ominously. Happy, thoughtless people danced regardless of the coming storm; then it broke, and all was ruin and desolation.

"Oh! The poor birds!" Marfa exclaimed; "And the flowers all beaten down by the rain! I can't bear that!"

"But I thought it was a revolution, Mademoiselle."

"Yes, that is what I always imagine it to be," she answered; "but it would be terrible. Let us hope such things never happen."

"It is not likely in Russia, but there are other countries where it would be possible."

"In France, perhaps," Nadejda agreed thoughtfully. "Somehow I always think of Paris when I play it: the gay, frivolous Court, and the poor starving in the faubourg behind the Bastille."

"Ah! Why do you talk of such horrors? I shall not dare to sleep to-night!"

Ostermann felt remorseful. What could have made him forget the tragedy in his young wife's life? Nadejda had not heard of it yet, and she turned back to the beautifully painted instrument, seeking some soothing melody. One of Scarlatti's Pastorales occurred to her, and she began to play. In an instant one of her hearers was transported into a formal, walled garden, which reminded him of the parsonage where he was born. He saw the trimly kept paths, the stiff hedges cut into fantastic shapes, the little summer house in which his father used to sit with his learned books and his pipe. Suddenly a gate opened, and he was in the wood, wandering among shady trees whose branches rustled overhead in the light wind, the birds were singing, and, somewhere near, a stream was chattering to itself of the wonders which lay before it.

His childhood came back vividly to his mind. That was the wood in which he had spent long hours dreaming of the future, inspired by the babble of the brook. He intended to follow it out into the world, and make a great career for himself. He had been ambitious then; but now he had lost the power to dream. He was absorbed in the affairs of every day. It struck him that it was curious how completely estranged

he had grown from his own relations. Perhaps that was owing to his mother's influence. While she lived, she was determined to be the center of the family, and she had succeeded in separating her children from each other. They met only round her, as the spokes of a wheel meet in the axle. When she died, they fell apart.

The music came back to the garden and its sundial. "I count only the sunny hours." That might be true of Mademoiselle, who had the faculty of forgetting clouds. He was too busy to notice the sunshine.

"How lovely, Nadiushka! It reminded me of Peterhof. I wish we were back there! You would love the Neva. It is so swift and strong, not like these sluggish rivers. And Peterhof is on a hill sixty feet high."

"Is that all?" the musician asked wistfully. The mountain blood in her veins made her long for the distant snowy peaks, and the keen moorland air, which gladdens the heart like wine.

"Russia has a beauty of her own," Ostermann interposed. He knew that homesickness for the hills, though he had almost forgotten it.

"Yes," Nadejda assented politely.

"What have we that can compare with the countries she has seen?" Marfa demanded scornfully. He need not try to flatter her by praising Russia.

"It has the grandeur of immensity. You cannot understand it yet, Mademoiselle, for you have seen so little of it. The land stretches unbroken from the cold white North to the warm Black Sea, from Poland to the low Ural hills, and beyond far away into Asia. Its possibilities are boundless, like its plains. No one knows what treasures lie buried in its earth, no one can foresee the destiny of its people. It is a vast blank page, on which to write something that, for good or evil, must influence the world."

"Politics!" murmured Marfa, though secretly thrilled with a new pride.

"Perhaps; but the land itself is beautiful in its own strange way. I have ridden with the great Tzar through miles and miles of mysterious forests, and then across a hundred leagues of steppes unsheltered by a tree. It was spring, and the tall grasses swayed before the wind, changing from one soft shade of green to another, or giving glimpses of the flowers which grow so thick together that the plain seems to be enameled in brilliant colors, like the meadow Dante saw."

"It would appear that His Excellency is a poet," Marfa sneered. She was possessed by an evil spirit that night.

"Isn't he a statesman?" Nadejda answered.

"Thanks, Mademoiselle; few people would see the connection."

"That is because most Ministers are merely politicians."

"They were not pupils of the great Tzar."

"How you must have admired him!"

"He was a giant, and the best of us are intellectually like the Court dwarfs beside him."

"Yet you saw Charles the Twelfth of Sweden."

"You cannot compare them. The Swede won barren victories in the battlefield, Peter conquered himself, and then fought worse evils than you can dream of. The first ruined his kingdom, the other founded an Empire."

He rose abruptly, and took leave, receiving a kiss from Aunt Tatiana, and a ceremonious curtsey from Marfa. Then, as he bowed over Nadejda's hand, he explained:

"Your music gave me great pleasure, for which I shall always owe you gratitude; but it gave me back the memories of my youth with its long-buried enthusiasms: so if they have wearied you, the blame should rest with yourself."

"Indeed, you have found the key to the padlock which fastens his tongue," Aunt Tatiana said when the door closed. "I have never heard him speak so much before. The admiration he expressed for Peter was really absurd! The man had the most boorish manners; for his favorites had always been of the lowest class; and, in addition, he was a dissolute drunkard.

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Please do not refer to him again in my presence."

"She sha'n't have a chance this evening, anyway," said Marfa. "She is looking horribly tired, and must come to bed at once."

Marfa led the way to Nadejda's room, and settled herself for a comfortable chat, while her friend brushed her hair.

"What a mass you have, Nadiushka! It is twice the length of mine, and more than twice as thick, I should say."

"But it isn't worth anything, because of its color. I tried to sell it once, but the hair-dresser offered so little that it was not worth while. If powder came in, it would be different."

"You must not talk like that; for you will never want anything while you live with me—which is to be always, you know. Are you satisfied that Count Ostermann won't object? It is odd that you can make him talk about things I never dreamed he cared for. I used to think that he served Russia as a paid clerk, caring for nothing except proving himself cleverer than some foreign diplomatist."

"You were not vexed, Marfa? I am afraid I talked too much."

"Of course not, little sister! But I am not sure about him. I hate finding I am wrong about people, and everybody has turned out

different from what I expected. I like them to behave exactly as I imagine they will. Never mind! You won't change, will you? I love your music so much, and it interests me to hear you talk. Have you really been happy?"

"Yes. Does that seem strange?"

"So strange that I can't understand it. I have not been happy for years, and yet I have had everything, while you—"

"I may seem to have had little; but perhaps that is what makes happiness easy. When one has met with as much kindness as I have, the world appears very beautiful. Besides, if our own life is rather empty, we have more time to take an interest in other people."

"That wouldn't console me if—" Marfa hesitated. The truth is often too brutal to be uttered, which is another gain to those like Nadejda.

"If you were hungry, do you mean? Yet it seems to me that the mere sight of a happy, smiling face reminds us of all the joy and gladness there is in the world, and we can hope that some of it may come our way some day. Hope is almost the best part of Life: the reality is seldom quite as beautiful."

"It never is; but the horrid things are worse."

"Oh no! I used to wonder whether they were half as real as the good. They only exist

in the future; when you get close to a trouble, it dwindles. There are many people like that, too, who appear very terrible until you get to know them, and then you find so much to love and pity that you forget the rest."

"Do you always forget what is bad?" Marfa asked curiously.

"Yes, but the good lasts."

CHAPTER XXII

Anna Ivanovna

THE Dolgoroukis triumphed. Anna came to Russia in their power. She had signed the terms they dictated, and they kept her so closely surrounded that she was a mere puppet in their hands. No one had access to her without their leave. She knew nothing but what they chose to tell her. Only once she asserted herself. On being met by the Guards, she insisted on pouring out a glass of brandy for each officer and man, which she gave them herself. Still, as she said nothing, no great harm was done.

"If Ostermann gets at her, we shall be lost," Prince Vassili prophesied.

"My Ivan will take good care of that," answered Prince Alexis. "She has kept him as Chamberlain, and he never lets any ill-disposed person come within three yards of her."

"We must take care, all the same. The man is as cunning as a fox. He will find a way in spite of us."

Prince Alexis laughed. He had reason to

believe they were quite safe. What absorbed his mind just now was whether it would be to his interest to arrange Ivan's marriage to the Empress. She was nearly three times the young man's age, but that was not the question. Could he trust Ivan in such a position? The father was jealous of his son, and feared to put himself in his power.

Vassili was right. Ostermann found a way. It was so simple that it took his enemies by surprise. He kept rigidly to his own rooms: he was too ill to ask for an audience; but he sent Ilja to Marfa to beg her to come to see him. She stared at the servant in angry astonishment. It seemed an impertinence.

"If he wishes to see me, I am here," she replied haughtily.

"He is too ill to move, gracious lady."

Marfa hesitated. In Nadejda's presence it was difficult to refuse.

"I will come," she said at last.

She found him lying on a sofa, dressed in a dark furred robe. There could be no question of the reality of this illness. There were dark circles under his weary eyes, and a tightness of the lips which spoke eloquently of sternly repressed suffering. Marfa's heart softened. Delicacy was weakness, and therefore to be despised; but a hard-fought fight against positive

pain, she could understand and sympathize with.

"You wanted to see me?" she inquired gently.

"I have a great favor to ask."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"From me?"

"Yes. There is something to be done, and I cannot do it myself."

"You think I could? Is it money?"

"No, I would not hesitate to ask for that, if it were necessary."

She smiled. They had not always agreed about that. The victory was hers, so she could afford to be generous now.

"Well, what else is there you think I could do?"

Her tone was friendly, but he lay still, watching her before he spoke.

"I am going to put my life in your hands, and we are not friends."

"Oh! If you are afraid to trust me, say no more. Your secret will be safer in your own keeping."

"Unfortunately, some one must act if we are to save Russia. Could you put aside all personal feeling in this matter, and do what must be done, though it is I who show you the way to do it?"

"You want me to help you against my cousins, the Dolgoroukis?"

"Yes."

She stood silent for a few minutes. There was a fierce struggle going on in her mind. It was so hard to decide what was right. Without her, he was helpless. His position must be desperate if he sought her help. If she refused, the triumph of the small party of nobles was assured. She knew by this time what that meant. They were utterly selfish, and the lesser nobles protested against their rule as loudly as the foreigners did. It would be a new form of tyranny, worse than the old. Besides that, it would mean the gradual ruin of Peter's work. Russia would slip back into Eastern barbarism.

Helping Ostermann, on the other hand, meant saving the country; and, not only that, he had said that the future of her nation must influence the world. Russia was no longer Muscovy, but a European State. It was a question between Moscow and Saint Petersburg; the old hateful, stifling traditions of evil, or the glorious possibilities that unfolded before her imagination like great banners floating in the strong sea-breezes. She knew the history of the past, and had learnt to loathe it. If the future were to be different, it must be woven

by the Neva, in light and air, under the eyes of the watching world.

"I will help you, Andrei Ivanovitch! I hate Moscow, and the Dolgoroukis make me ashamed."

His face gave no sign of joy or relief. His voice was quite calm as he began his instructions.

"You must go to the Empress, and explain to her that her oath is not binding, because it was obtained by a fraud. She was told that the new Constitution was desired by the nation, instead of being dictated by not even all the members of the Supreme Council. If she chooses to grant a Constitution, she must first consult the people. She is too just to give away her power to a mere handful, who would tyrannize over those beneath them. When the Romanoffs were elected, it was by an assembly of all the nobles. They gave absolute authority to the Crown, and they alone can take it away."

Marfa's disappointment was great. Her husband began by speaking of action, and she had imagined there would be some great deed to be performed. She had fancied herself going among the soldiers, speaking to them of the glories of Peter's campaigns, appealing to Lindsay, perhaps, to help her, then marching in force to free the Empress, and

overthrow the Dolgoroukis. This was too dull for her. It was just like Ostermann—one of his subtle, hardly perceptible, strokes of policy, with nothing dazzling or heroic about it.

"It might be a good thing if we had a Constitution," she said.

"Like that of Poland," he supplied calmly.

"Of course not. You told me that was what ruined the Poles; but the English have one, Lady Rondeau says."

"Yes. If you first free the serfs, it might be possible, but—"

"We will never do that!"

"Then you can't have political freedom. If liberty is restricted to one small class, it ends in anarchy. Richelieu knew that, when he took away the privileges of the French nobles to prevent them from intriguing with foreign powers against each other and their king."

Marfa looked sulky, but she kept her promise. For an hour she sat listening patiently while Ostermann explained the arguments she must use, and how the Empress might play upon the opposing interests of her would-be rulers. At last, she rose.

"I won't forget, and I will wait upon the Empress to-morrow."

"And be civil to Count Bieren."

"Bah! Don't you know what the Galit-

zins say of him? He talks of horses like a man, but of men like a horse!"

"The Galitzins are wittier than I thought, and less prudent. But you must take care; for that man is the future ruler of Russia."

"The son of a German groom!"

"In the sight of an Empress, all men are equal."

Marfa made no answer. Aunt Tatiana said the same. Was it true? Then why had she fancied there was such a gulf between herself and Ostermann? Was it a mistake, after all? But she had little time to think of that; the task before her would absorb all her energies. If she failed, the Dolgoroukis would be merciless; and how could she succeed in obtaining a private interview? The consideration of the difficulties roused her spirit. It was something of an adventure, after all!

The next day Marfa found the halls of the Kremlin filled to overflowing by the numerous persons who had flocked to Moscow to watch events, or take part in them. It struck her, as she entered by one of the outer doors (the Dolgoroukis had closed the private way since Peter's death), that the assembly was far larger than that which elected the first Romanoff, a little more than a hundred years ago. Then there were none but Muscovites and converted Tartars; now the nobles of Great Russia rep-

resented fifty conquered, tributary, or friendly nations. Finns, Livonians, Lithuanians, Poles, Cossacks, Moldavians, Mingrelians, Georgians, more Tartars from freshly won territories, Germans, Italians, French, Dutch, and Scotch, were there in dozens. Every costume seemed represented, while the talk reminded her of the story of the Tower of Babel. Lindsay was the centre of a small but distinguished group of his countrymen: Keith, the brother of the Earl Marischal of Scotland, who had come to seek military glory under General Münnich, and meantime was busy spreading Free Masonry, which had died out of every country save his own; Count Douglas, who had left Sweden for Russia; Ramsay of Balmaine, once a Turkish Pasha, now a Russian boyar; and Count Bruce, diplomatist, astronomer, man of science, who was so generally regarded as a wizard that Marfa crossed herself in passing him.

In the next hall stood the Empress and the Grand Duchess Elizabeth. Their armchairs were placed where those of the young Emperor and his betrothed had been; but Anna preferred standing, so her cousin had no choice. They were a great contrast to each other: the Empress tall, swarthy, imperious-looking; Elizabeth, small, fair, smiling. The stern state-

liness of Anna made her many enemies, eager to think the worst of her friendship for Bieren. Elizabeth's geniality won her friends ready to explain away her maddest freaks. "She was innocently light-hearted," said her apologists; "no Princess was ever so unmindful of her dignity as she appeared to be."

"You are doubly welcome, Marfa Ivanovna, for our eyes have not yet been blessed with the sight of your good man," was the Grand Duchess's greeting.

"Alas, Madame, His Excellency is ill."

Ivan Dolgorouki shrugged his shoulders, his father smiled maliciously.

"Perhaps Her Majesty will provide rest and a change of air for him," he murmured in his son's ear.

"I am deeply grieved by your news, cousin," the Empress answered. Her tone spoke of anxiety and trouble. She wanted advice desperately, and there was no one to give it. "Was it his devotion to the late Tzar, which injured his health? Or is it some passing ailment?"

Marfa heard the anxiety in the voice, and seized her chance.

"It is constitutional, I fear, Your Majesty. The details are hardly fitted for the public ear."

A gleam of joy lighted up the Empress's swarthy face.

"Every detail of the great man's health is of importance to us, my cousin. Come to our private apartments, that we may know all."

Ivan Dolgorouki sprang forward to bar the way; but Anna's glance was so terrible that he fell back in dismay. Marfa followed her imperial mistress quietly, showing no sign of elation. She had begun to doubt the value of this interview, and half expected to be commanded to call out the troops, after all. Mechanically she repeated her message, but the effect was startling.

"Say that once more!" exclaimed the Empress, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Your Gracious Majesty, having been deceived by the Supreme Council, is not bound to observe an oath obtained by fraud."

"Yes, I was deceived, I was told—"

She hesitated. She had hardly understood the allusion to the will of the nation, which Marfa had failed to repeat the second time. It was too strange an idea to be readily grasped by a Romanoff.

"Your Gracious Majesty was told that it was the unanimous desire of all your loyal subjects, whereas it was only the suggestion of certain members of the Supreme Council."

"But the nation!" Anna laughed harshly.

"What is the Russian nation, and who shall guess its wishes?"

"Count Ostermann told me that the late King of France once said: 'I am the State.' Your Majesty is, in the same way, the representative of the nation."

"Ah!"

The Empress began pacing up and down. She was eager to free herself from the yoke of the Supreme Council, but she distrusted Ostermann. He was suspected of liberal theories. What if this were a trap? Yet it seemed worth trying. If her authority were once established, she would be beyond the reach of further danger. No Romanoff had been murdered or deposed. The crown of Russia conferred a sanctity upon its wearer which was a safeguard against attack.

"Who would support me?" Anna asked at last.

"The majority of the nobles, Madame, and the Army!" Marfa saw herself riding sword in hand to do great deeds. "We have learnt that the tyranny of the Council is worse than that of the harshest sovereign. Menschikoff taught us to regret his master; and, of late, the lesson has been driven home. Your Majesty would be the mother of her people, the others are bloodthirsty leeches."

Anna took one more turn up and down the room. Then her mind was made up.

"Tell Count Ostermann that I understand, and am grateful for his advice. I am the Empress, and it is my right to wield the sceptre as well as to wear the crown. I will call the Assembly together, and in their presence I will tear the Constitution to pieces. Tell Count Ostermann that I shall never forget this service. I know how to pay my debts."

There was a fierce gleam in her eyes, which suggested that the last words were intended less as an expression of gratitude, than as a threat of revenge against the insolence of the Dolgoroukis, one of whom had just flung open the door.

"Why are we interrupted without our permission?" Anna demanded haughtily.

"I feared to leave Your Majesty too long alone. Countess Ostermann's devotion to her husband is so notorious that we thought it likely that she might bring infection with her."

"This tender consideration for our health is touching, and shall not go unrewarded. Farewell, Marfa Ivanovna."

Marfa curtseying, kissed the hand held out, and withdrew. Her work was done.

CHAPTER XXIII

Marfa Travels Far

ANNA met with no opposition when she tore the Constitution to pieces in presence of her nobles. Even the Dolgoroukis bowed before her determination. The old Field Marshal would not help them to rebel openly against their Sovereign, and they fell, in one day, from absolute power into hopeless disgrace. In a few weeks they were on the way to Siberia to replace the orphans of Prince Menschikoff, who were recalled, and found themselves once more in the enjoyment of all their former possessions. The confiscated property was restored, and their money was still safe in the care of honest foreigners; no inducements could tempt the Bank of England, or that of Amsterdam, to give up their trust to any save the rightful owners.

"Will you do nothing to save my cousins?" Marfa had pleaded.

Ostermann shook his head.

"Yet I helped you; so you owe me something!"

"I have tried already, and failed," he explained wearily. "Her Majesty was gracious enough to

remind me that the affairs of the interior were not the concern of the Foreign Minister. By the way, a courier has just brought this letter for you, with his despatches."

"It is from my brothers," Marfa exclaimed joyfully. "And they are both coming home! I must start at once for Saint Petersburg to meet them."

She hurried to tell Aunt Tatiana the good news, and then began feverishly to prepare for her start.

"They say that they won't be in Saint Petersburg before Christmas, so there is no such hurry," grumbled the elder woman.

"Well, we needn't go fast, but we must start. I want to feel that I am a little nearer to them every evening."

"The Court will soon follow you," Ostermann observed, to comfort Tatiana; "so a winter journey was unavoidable."

"Oh! That makes all the difference. I thought we were merely scampering off on a wild-goose chase. Now I shall be glad to go first, before the swarm comes to eat everything up on the way and leave us their tired horses."

So they started. All day they lay each on a narrow sledge, like a cradle on runners, muffled to the eyes to protect them from the biting frost. They could see and hear, but there were

no sights except league after league of snow-laden branches, and no sound save the jingling bells on the harness covering the three horses with an intricate network of fine leather straps. They met only at night, when they halted in a clearing, made a great fire, and encamped round it. No one ever dreamed of sleeping in the miserable hovels by the way, where fresh relays of horses were obtained.

It was very lonely, and Marfa had plenty of time to think. How strange it would be to meet her brothers after all these years! What would they be like? What sort of ideas would they have? She had just taken part in a political crisis, and that too occupied her mind. What would Vladimir say when he knew which side she had taken? Would Pavel still stand her friend, or would he disown her because of her marriage with a serf! The possibility haunted her for three days. It made her angry at last. From Nadejda she had learnt that in Germany the nation was not divided sharply into two classes, nobles and serfs. Her friend spoke much of the burghers,—wealthy, cultivated, absolutely free. The pastors belonged to that class, and were not ignorant peasants, but often very learned men.

Ostermann was born free, and so were his father and grandfather, probably. Any one

could see the difference between him and Bieren. He was a noble, by contrast. What was Nadejda's word? Ah, yes! "Gentleman," that was it. Her husband was a gentleman, and Nadejda said that a king himself could be no more. Vladimir might not understand, but she would find Pavel easier to convince. He had traveled so much, and had been at Oxford, which she was almost sure was in England. The English understood such things; and they had a strange admiration for Ostermann, to judge by the flattering speeches Sir Claude Rondeau sometimes made her.

Marfa brooded over these ideas for days, and then began to wonder at her eagerness to praise and defend the man she had always disliked. Did she no longer hate him? She could not decide that question. He was still a foreigner and an atheist.

She spoke of him to Nadejda that evening. Ilja was finishing the temporary hut of rough-hewn branche he sometimes erected if the night threatened to be stormy. It was Gospoja Gordon who started the idea, by saying that they ought to have a shelter where they could change their clothes. He thought it nonsense. The journey only lasted a month, and there were two towns on the way, where the inns were decent enough for ladies to enter.

But foreign women were odd, as he knew from the tales he had heard of Lady Rondeau and her English friends. Aunt Tatiana had not yet arrived. She traveled slowly, lest the sharp wind should penetrate the furs over her face, and chafe her tender skin. Marfa and her friend had seized the opportunity to exercise their stiffened limbs. It was wearisome lying so still all day.

"What do you think of your great man now?" Marfa asked.

"Who?" returned Nadejda, rather puzzled. She had not thought of one man constantly for days.

"Count Ostermann, of course."

"Oh!"

The lame woman gave her friend a quick side glance, but she could see little of Marfa's face.

"Well?"

"I am sorry for him."

"Why?"

"His face is so sad, I do not think he can be happy."

"What an idea! He is the most successful man I know. All Peter's other favorites have fallen, but he comes scatheless out of every danger. He has made himself a unique position."

"Yes, but a man wants more than that."

"How absurd! What else can he require?"

"I don't know. Only I sometimes think—"

"What, Nadiushka?"

Marfa was watching the tracks of wild animals across the snow. There was the three-footed mark the hares make after their long leaps, and the light track left by the foxes, who never sink in as the other beasts do. This looked like one of their own dogs, for something had floundered heavily, breaking through the thin ice on the top; and there—far away between the trees, the eyes of hungry wolves were gleaming. Near by she saw a warm curl of breath rising out of the snow, which showed where a bear had made his lair. She noted these things carelessly, but her heart was beating with anxiety to hear Nadejda's answer. Did Ostermann want what she could give him?

"You told me that he is supposed not to believe in God. Do you think a man could be content to gain the world, if he found no peace for his soul?"

"I don't suppose he cares about that," Marfa answered hastily. She was disappointed by her friend's reply, and inclined to resent it. "You remember he said only a few weeks ago that religion was a harmless occupation for women.

I was angry, and retorted that the great Peter had thought it something more than that. He said: 'Yes. He looked on it as a useful instrument for governing a country like Russia.' Then you asked what his own view was and he told you that it did not come within the province of the Foreign Secretary."

"I had not forgotten, but all that proves nothing. No man with brains can help thinking of such things sometimes."

"Perhaps. Anyway, it wouldn't make much difference to him."

"There I think you are wrong. When a man is very rich, very strong, or very happy, he may put aside questions of belief as unsolved problems which don't concern him much. But if he be poor, or ill, or sad, then the veil which hides his soul from him will wear thin, and he will begin to understand her craving for spiritual things."

Marfa was silent for a few minutes. The hut was finished, and they could enter, but Tatiana had arrived, and so would prevent further talk. They stood at the entrance to the clearing, and Marfa spoke again, hurriedly:

"I still don't know why you should pity him. Want of faith is a sin."

She would have supported the Inquisition, in her most fanatical mood.

"A sin! Oh, Marfa! You can't think that! It seems to me the very greatest misfortune that could befall any one. You are sorry for those you see starving in the streets. Have you no compassion for a human soul that is dying of want?"

"Nadejda!" called Aunt Tatiana sharply, coming to the opening of the hut. "Come here, at once! A courier has just passed, announcing that the Coronation is over, and the Court start for Saint Petersburg immediately."

The two hurried across the clearing, and Nadejda sat down beside the elder lady to discuss clothes.

"There is to be a great reception when they arrive, and a series of State balls and festivities. What shall I wear? I don't want those foreign hussies to sneer at my dirty old rags."

"I promise that they shan't do that," Nadejda answered soothingly. She had devoted herself to working for Marfa's aunt, since Marfa herself flatly refused to let her earn her own living. Her services were accepted with no superfluous expressions of gratitude, yet she was aware that they were appreciated.

"You have good taste and clever fingers," Aunt Tatiana sometimes condescended to remark.

"I am always glad to please you, Sudarinia; and I do not find you difficult to dress. You are very like my mother."

"Then the poor lady can't have been a beauty!" Aunt Tatiana returned; but she was none the less pleased.

For the rest of the way Marfa traveled in silence. They never stopped now, day or night, except to change horses, so they all had plenty of time to think.

CHAPTER XXIV

Pavel's Enthusiasm

MARFA was wholly absorbed in admiring her brothers for the first few days after they met in Saint Petersburg. Vladimir had grown gigantic, his face was distinctly handsome, while dress and manners alike were stamped with the impress of Paris. Pavel was almost as tall, but neither so good-looking nor so elegant. He seldom used a cane, and only remembered his snuff-box when he was obliged to return a civility in kind. In private, he was even believed to smoke a pipe, the custom of Leipsic and Leyden.

The town was unusually gay after the long neglect it had suffered. There were regiments of troops marching in to fill all the barracks, and crowds of peasants hurrying up from the country to see the new Empress. Marfa took her brothers everywhere, and was disappointed by their lack of interest.

"I will show you the markets, Vladimir. Nadejda says they have nothing like them in other countries."

So she ordered the gayest painted sledge, and

drove over the frozen river to the island where the merchants lived. There in the open square were solid pyramids of birds, beasts, and fishes, which the venders hacked at with axes. When a block was cut out, it had to be partly melted at one of the roaring fires, to make sure that the buyer had what he wished, instead of part of something else. It was difficult to get the whole of one fish out of the splintering ice; and the purchasers grumbled, or laughed, or chaffed the unskilful server of the stall.

"What a savage you are, Marfa!" said her elder brother. "This sort of sight does not interest me in the least. Have you nothing better to show me than dirty peasants in frowsy sheepskins, chopping logs of ice instead of wood?"

"Vladimir really cares only for pretty ladies," laughed Pavel. "But you are the prettiest he can hope to see. You have grown up a perfect beauty, Marfiushka!"

His sister blushed with pleasure.

"Wait till you see Elisavetta Petrovna," she answered. "She is the loveliest woman at the Court."

"And kindly withal?" Vladimir inquired, smiling, as he played with the curls of his wig.

'What do you want to see, Pavel?" Marfa asked, promptly changing the subject to glide off dangerous ground.

"Count Ostermann."

"Count Ostermann!" echoed the astonished wife.

"Why not? He is the greatest diplomatist in Europe, and the true successor of the greatest man who ever lived."

"Do you really think that? You aren't joking?"

"Do you suppose that I have become stupid through living abroad? We always called those who spoke no Russian 'the dumb men,' but even they are not blind. The whole world recognizes Peter as one of the most remarkable figures in history. I know that he was without an equal."

"Yes, but Count Ostermann," Marfa persisted.

"Well, I also know that he is the bolt, as the English Ambassador said, which holds together the machine invented by the Tzar. I tell you, Marfa, that I am proud to call myself his brother-in-law. Ah! I see, you imagined I was still an ignorant, provincial nobody, too petty to bow before the throne of genius."

"'Provincial nobody,' 'petty'! But we are descended from Rurik!" exclaimed his sister, scandalized.

"What of that? Times have changed. We judge men by their merits, not by their birth. Richelieu taught that to the Kings of France, and every country in Europe has learned the les-

son since then. Even in England, where the people are hampered by long tradition, they feel the change coming, and the real power is in the hands of the foreign Queen and her prime-minister, who is not a noble—merely a country gentleman. In Russia we, too, have an almost foreign sovereign, and Ostermann is greater than Walpole, besides being the pupil of Peter. We are a new nation with a new capital. Let us throw aside all worn-out prejudices, and strike out a new line ruled by new principles!"

Marfa stared at him in wonder. Vladimir laughed.

"The only new idea I accept is the divine sovereignty of Woman. I gladly bow before that throne."

Marfa returned home as one in a dream. Her world was once more shaken to its foundations. She had fancied herself gradually overcoming her brothers' scorn and contempt for her low-born husband, and the thought had given her pleasure. The moment had come when she wished to offer Ostermann her friendship. She might have made him feel that it was a condescension on her part; but secretly she had grown eager that he should accept. She had done him a great service, and serving creates a sense of the superiority of the served. One protects inferiors, helps one's friends, serves

those above. Gratitude, too, is seldom absent from the doer of a kindness. Marfa almost loved the man who had asked a favor from her.

Now Pavel's words changed everything. His sister's long-cherished pedestal was knocked from under her, and she fell into the lowest depths of despondency. It was true what he said. Ostermann was a great man. All the world had seen it, only his wife had been wilfully blind. She had insulted him, contemptuously rejected his proffered friendship, telling him that it could exist only between equals; and now, when she was hesitating before sacrificing her pride to ask for what she had spurned, she discovered that it was not for her to make the advance. They were no nearer equality than before: for he was a genius, as Pavel declared, and she—ah! the sting was cruelly sharp—she was a petty provincial, whose love mattered as little to him as her hate. She compared herself, in the fervor of her new humility, to a peasant girl who was mad enough to give her love unsought to a Tzar. It was not worthy of his acceptance.

That evening Lindsay supped at the Foreign Office. Marfa had invited him two or three days before to meet her brothers, thinking that they might find more in common with a foreigner than with the untraveled Russians, who were the

only society to be found in the forsaken capital. When the Empress came, all that would be changed, but she had not arrived yet.

"Is Count Douglas a countryman of yours?" Pavel suddenly asked.

"Well, he is half a Swede; but his grandfather came from Scotland."

"And is the story about his cruelty to his serf true?"

Marfa looked up.

"What story? I had not heard anything."

Lindsay's bright color deepened.

"It isn't much to his credit or ours; but these Russian peasants hardly seem human. One is tempted to try experiments to see how much they will stand."

"So you think Count Douglas was justified in firing a train of gunpowder along the back of a helpless serf?"

"What a brute!" Nadejda exclaimed fiercely.

Marfa glanced at Lindsay, waiting eagerly for his answer.

"Well, personally, I wouldn't like to do it, or see it done; but, as I said, your peasants don't strike us as quite human. They resent nothing; and there are few men who might not feel tempted to try to find the limit of their passive submission."

"They are too cowardly to resist," Marfa

threw in, with an angry flash in her eyes. "They prefer to make sure of their victim, and then commit murder. Count Douglas had better beware."

"I am ashamed of you, my sister. How unjust you are to our poor fellow countrymen! No wonder foreigners ill-treat them, if their own masters understand them so little!"

"Of course you understand people you haven't seen since you were a boy, much better than we do, who have lived among them, and suffered from them, all our lives!"

"Now you are speaking like a child, Marfa. In judging a nation, one must put aside individual prejudices."

"If Pavel is going to talk like that, I am off. Good-night."

Vladimir fled; but the others listened. The speaker might be dull, but the subject was interesting to them all.

"You must remember all that our serfs have endured for centuries—the waves of foreign conquest that have flowed over Russia, as well as the persistent cruelty of some of our own nobles. They have suffered from Tartars and Poles, from Moslems and Roman Catholics; but, through all, they have clung to their own religion and their own customs. When many of us conformed to the creed of our con-

querors, the peasants remained Christians. Now we call their firmness obstinacy, their meek endurance cowardice, their constancy fanaticism; but the fact remains that they are a remarkable race—patient, tenacious, and brave as the early Christian martyrs."

"Pavel! How dare you say such things! Don't you know that they murdered Mistress Christian before my eyes?"

"Poor little Marfa! I did not know that you were there."

"But you knew they murdered her, and yet you praise them."

"You don't understand them, and I am trying to explain how they appear to an apologist. Ever since they killed my father—"

"Did they murder him too?"

"Yes. I wonder you never found that out. Well, ever since I heard of his death, I began to study peasant movements, and to note the differences between our own and those of other nations."

"And you found your father's cowardly assassins incomparably superior?" demanded Marfa scornfully.

"Incomparably," Pavel repeated quietly. "Few peasants would endure so much—"

"Because they are not such cowards."

"None resent private wrongs so little, none

have a greater feeling for their own community—it amounts to a sort of public spirit—and none are more just in their anger."

"Do you think it was just to kill a woman who had never harmed them?"

"That is not quite the point, Marfa. They suffered every sort of personal cruelty and insult from my father—"

"I was talking of Mistress Christian."

"We are coming to her in time. It was my father's insult to the village priest that roused them to action. He had insulted their religion, had violated their most sacred traditions, and he must die. But, having killed him, they did no further harm. French or German peasants would have committed horrible outrages, and burnt and destroyed everything. You were three helpless women entirely at their mercy, cut off from the world by miles of forest; their crimes would have gone unpunished for years, indeed they might never have been discovered. But, instead, they killed their enemy so quietly that you were not aware of it, I suppose you thought that he died a natural death; and all the winter you lived on, at their mercy, without the least alarm."

"You forget Mistress Christian," Marfa persisted.

"No, I was just coming to that. She was a

foreigner, old Sonia thought her a witch, and she did not trust them. They learnt that she intended to tell you that your father had been murdered, and they determined that you should not know. That is all."

"All! Why, it was horrible! Why did they think her a witch? What right had they to kill her, in any case?"

"Oh! as to that, most nations believe in witchcraft. I have seen one harmless old woman nearly drowned for her supposed crimes; and the Scotch executed a respectable Major in their army, not so long ago, for practising the black art. Our people are cruel when you rouse their fanaticism, but they are fanatical because we keep them ignorant. Let us free them, give them the responsibilities of men, teach them how to be worthy of their responsibility, and Russia will be the greatest country in the world! Then, instead of the selfish constitution of the Dolgoroukis, we shall have a great Charta on the English model, and the free, manly peasants will help us to remember that we, too, are men, and not merely the slaves of the Crown."

CHAPTER XXV

The Love of Women

A FEW days later the Empress made her State entry, under countless arches erected on the frozen river, and through streets gay with flags. Every one welcomed her with joy. The Orthodox, accustomed now to the idea of a woman ruler, rejoiced that she was a Romanoff, born in a palace, and not an ex-servant girl and camp-follower like Catherine. She was a true Russian, moreover, speaking foreign languages with difficulty; so they hoped that she would be more likely to confide important government positions to men of her own nation. As yet Bieren was unknown to those outside the palace.

In the next carriage sat the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, gay, gracious, smiling on all alike. Her beauty appealed to every eye, her merry laughter won all hearts. Europeans and Asiatics alike admired her as the loveliest woman at the Court; the crowd were loud in their expressions of delight.

"Was there ever such a Tzar's daughter?" they asked each other. "Her smile would melt

the thickest ice. Our golden beauty is like the summer sun. The sight of her face makes one forget the frost and snow."

Marfa overheard some of these compliments, and turned to Vladimir.

"Well, little brother, what do you think of her?"

"Who can think when his eyes are dazzled by such radiance? I never dreamed that Russia could boast beauty so divine!"

"Quick, Marfa!" whispered Pavel, on the other side. "Is that Ostermann? Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The English cheer rang out above the welcome of the crowd. Elisavetta Petrovna turned her head, saw the two young men in well-cut, foreign clothes, and kissed her hand to their sister.

"What a magnificent face! How benevolent it is, as well as strong and calm! What an ideal Statesman!"

"Did you see her brilliant eyes?" asked Vladimir at the same moment. "They remind me of that handsome governess we had as children. I admire all colors, but blue is where one looks to find heaven."

"Don't lose your heart to her, my little Vladimir! She chooses all her favorites from among her servants."

"Then I will pray her to accept me as her groom."

Marfa made no answer. Her brothers' enthusiasm disquieted her. What would Count Ostermann say to them? Would they add to his difficulties? Would he dislike her more because they gave him trouble? She found no answer to these questions. Her husband seemed changed by the last few months in Moscow. She saw less of him in public, and she never saw him alone. Once she made up her mind to speak to him, to apologize for the past, and beg humbly for his friendship in the future. No one should see her go to him, she would pass through her private rooms to his. But the door was locked. It was too late.

Ostermann was changed. The death of the boy he had loved, as well as the long strain of political anxiety, had told on him, and Anna's cold determination to employ him only in foreign matters, destroyed half his interest in the future. There was so much to be done, and it chafed him sorely to stand by unable to act. Yet he did not for a moment repent having saved Russia from an oligarchy, by confirming the supreme power of the Crown. The Autocrat might be good or bad, wise or foolish, but he, or she, regarded the country as private property, and each would do his best for it accordingly. The nobles looked on it only as their prey.

He had studied the history of the two neigh-

boring nations too deeply to have any doubt on that head. Sweden was great when ruled by a strong sovereign, weak and despised when its government was in the hands of the aristocracy. Poland had fallen into such a state of anarchy, owing to its elective monarchy, that it was sinking into barbarism. Already its people were as uncivilized as those of Russia before the reign of Peter the Great, and soon its ruin would be complete. It was becoming the political plague-spot of Europe. Count Ostermann clearly foresaw the time when the neighboring powers must interfere for their own sakes. The Empire would attempt to seize it, and, perhaps, the new Kingdom of Prussia would try to get a share. Then Russia would be obliged to step in; but he hoped that day might be far distant. He feared the effect on the nation, of hasty conquests and ill-assimilated additions to her population. Asiatics might pass like sheep from one owner to another; the Finns were quiet, law-abiding and industrious, so unlikely to cause trouble; but the Cossacks were still difficult to manage, and the Poles would be well-nigh impossible. Well! The division would probably not come about in his lifetime.

As to Marfa, her husband fancied her too much taken up with her brothers to care much

for his society. He noticed that she was less aggressive in her manner to him, but he thought that the change was due to her being now a grown-up woman, instead of an impulsive petulant child. Both he and Nadejda were inclined to suspect that her occasional fits of melancholy were due to her feeling for Lindsay. Ostermann sometimes heard her singing mournful Russian love-songs, which tended to confirm that impression. Whenever the family dined alone, Marfa sang to her balalaika or to Nadejda's accompaniment, and was aware that her voice gave him pleasure; but those were comparatively rare occasions: for there were all the foreign ambassadors to be entertained. The Empress could not talk any language save her own: so she left the entertainment of the Diplomatic body entirely to the Vice-Chancellor.

Pavel's constant presence proved rather a hindrance to his sister's timid advances. He was full of vague political aspirations, which he discussed with his brother-in-law, if there was no music to distract his thoughts; and on such occasions, Marfa had to keep silence. Abstract ideas bothered her. She resolved everything into the practical question of how it would affect Ostermann, and when they spoke of the changes that might take place in

fifty years, it obviously could not concern her.

Only one person was aware of Marfa's real state of mind, and that was Lindsay. He came to see her when Nadejda was shut up with Aunt Tatiana, planning the dress to be worn on a solemn State occasion. Ostermann was in his cabinet, as usual, and Marfa was alone, making a dismal pretense at embroidery. He sat beside her, and tried to cheer her by retailing some of the funniest and least scandalous episodes of Court life. His hearer was a lady in waiting, but she had been off duty that week.

"It is curious how much alike all favorites are!" Marfa reflected. "I wonder why it is that Count Ostermann is so different."

Lindsay's face grew grave. He did not want to talk of that particular man to this woman. There were other topics he would have dwelt on with far greater pleasure.

"We have seen so many favorites, you and I," she went on, "Menschikoff, the Dolgoroukis, Bieren, they had nothing in common before their rise, but they all became insolent and overbearing, while nothing affects my husband."

"Possibly His Excellency is different because he has never been a favorite. He is indispensable, that is all; and he, in his turn,

uses others as they use him. He treats all men alike as tools, never as friends or enemies. He relies on no one, and wants nothing—for himself."

Marfa drew a quick breath that was almost a sigh. Lindsay watched her, wondering. What was it that troubled her? Surely no one had less cause for sorrow. If she really cared for her grave husband, why was she not happy? Whatever the Vice-Chancellor's earlier weaknesses might have been, no one whispered a word of scandal against him now. If she did not care for him, there were plenty of other men eager to console her.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "That is what makes it so hard! He wants nothing for himself. He has given his whole life to Russia. If I could help him in his work! But a woman can do so little."

Lindsay laughed mirthlessly.

"You say that, Countess? In this Court!"

"What does the Court matter?" she answered contemptuously.

"Well, the Court rules the Empire."

Marfa pushed aside her work.

"If I knew what to do!"

"Why do you distress yourself about that? Count Ostermann's position with the Empress is unshakable. He has no need of your help, and it must be enough for him to have the most

beautiful wife in Russia. Other men would give their souls to win your lightest favor. Can he be so senseless—"

"Hush! You must not speak to me like that."

She rose and faced him for a moment, growing pale as she met his eyes.

"Marfa!"

His voice was passionate, appealing, yet in his heart he knew it was too late.

She turned away with a stifled sob, and said:

"You must forgive me! I never dreamed—"

He caught at her vanishing self-control.

"It is I who ask your pardon, dear. I did not mean to grieve you."

She made no answer, but he saw her press her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Is there no hope for me?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. Words failed her, and she could not trust her voice. He was her friend. In the early days of her marriage, he had done so much to make life endurable. He had been kindly, loyal, considerate then, when she needed protection against herself. Now she was making him suffer. It seemed to her the only gift she gave to those who befriended her.

"Forgive me, Marfa!" he pleaded.

She turned again, holding out both hands impulsively. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"It is all my fault. I was odious to him. No wonder you thought I did not love him. I never knew that myself till lately. And now I have made you unhappy too!"

"Don't let that grieve you, dearest! Forget it, and try to trust me. I swear that I will not annoy you by repeating this folly. Only leave me your friendship still. I will ask nothing more."

"Poor Walter!" she said sadly. "I am so sorry! Indeed I will always be your friend, but you will try to forget this. I am not worthy of any man's love, and all my heart is given to Count Ostermann."

He stooped and kissed her hands.

"No, I shall never forget; but you need not fear. We Lindsays, 'endure fort,' and make no moan."

CHAPTER XXVI

The Return of La Chêtardie

FOR some months Marfa remained despondent. She was of those who love to make costly offerings to the god of their idolatry; and she sought in vain for means to make one now. There was so little that Ostermann wanted, as she had told Lindsay, and that little was not for himself. Anna had shown her gratitude by giving him a large estate, so Marfa felt that even her money was not needed. What could she do?

It was then that the new French Ambassador came to Saint Petersburg. The Marquis de la Chêtardie had gained one object of his ambition: he was no longer a subordinate, but a full-fledged Minister with complete discretionary powers. He determined to make his stay memorable, and found Count Ostermann still at the Foreign Office.

"I am afraid you do not remember me, Countess. You were hardly more than a child when I left Russia; but I have never forgotten the divine grace with which you danced into the

favor of the Tzar and the hearts of all the beholders."

"I congratulate you on your memory, Monsieur. If you can remember such a trifling incident after so many years, you must find it easy to recall anything that affects your diplomatic work."

"Ah! but I do not call such an incident trifling. Women so rarely make a lasting impression on me, that I could not forget one who did."

Marfa laughed.

"I fancied your reputation was not that of a St. Anthony!"

"How cruelly men are misjudged! I assure you, Madame, only one woman ever quickened the beating of my heart for a second, and she is hopelessly beyond my reach. It is true that others have been kind enough to love me better than I deserve, but you know how generous your adorable sex is."

Marfa frowned slightly. She was leaning back in her chair, and the corner was not brilliantly lighted, so he could not see her face. Then an idea struck her. If she snubbed him, as she wished, she might make him Ostermann's enemy; while if she pretended to encourage him, even a little, she might gain valuable information from him for her husband. She felt no compunction. He was evidently not capable of a

serious passion, so would not suffer except through his vanity; and meantime he would enjoy the flirtation.

"I hope you do not abuse the power you have over us, Monsieur. Only a tyrant would do that."

"Against such as you, Countess, I am defenseless, and too much a slave to dream of tyranny."

"It is fortunate that I am no longer the inexperienced girl you saw at the dance, or I might believe your fine compliments were sincere."

"Why do you doubt it? Who could dare to utter a falsehood under those beautiful eyes, in which Truth herself is mirrored?"

"I am not sure that is flattering," Marfa laughed; "for mirrors are glassy and have no individuality."

"You are cruel to mock at a helpless slave, whose very wits are in bondage!"

"Take care, Monsieur le Marquis! We Russians are barbarously literal, and regard all slaves as servants. Perhaps I may forget that you are a noble, and order you to perform the duties of a lackey!"

"You have but to command, most gracious lady. I would obey you humbly in all things."

It was a fairly safe promise; for her position

as the wife of the Vice-Chancellor would prevent her from carrying out her threat. She knew that; but his readiness in accepting her challenge amused her; and he was fascinated by her gaiety. For some weeks, the new interest he brought into her life kept her from brooding; but as time passed, and La Chêtardie adroitly fenced at any allusion to politics, she grew impatient once more. This was not the way to serve Ostermann, after all. But the Frenchman was blinder than she guessed. He believed her to be devoted to him, and only held back by pride.

Then Vladimir came to see her. His visits had grown rare of late.

"You are always with the Grand Duchess now," she said reproachfully.

"How can I help it, since she has done me the honor to appoint me one of her gentlemen in waiting."

"Still it is not wise to be with her so constantly. You should come to Court now and then."

"Why? To grovel before a German groom? Is that what you think worthy occupation for your brother?"

Marfa glanced anxiously round the room. No one whispered such things in that house.

"Are you afraid to hear the truth, little sis-

ter? Have you grown so meek that you no longer feel any anger at the insolence of that ill-bred upstart? Do you not care when you see us trodden down? Russia, our holy mother-country, is given over to be the prey of foreign leeches, who suck her life-blood, and you are content to stand idly by!"

Marfa stared at him in speechless surprise. Was this her frivolous elder brother, who had seemed to care for nothing but pretty women?

"Do you never blush for shame," he went on, "when you see your kinsman, all who bear the greatest names in history, exposed to insults worse than death?"

Then she found words. She raised her head proudly as she answered:

"No, I feel no pity for those who submit tamely to personal indignities."

"Have you heard of the fate of our cousin, Michael Galitzin?"

"Yes. He has become one of the Court buffoons."

"It is far worse than that! He is to be forced to marry a hideous Kalmuck dwarf, and the Empress has decreed that they are to spend the wedding night in the palace she has ordered to be built of blocks of ice."

His voice was trembling with the horror he felt at the insult to the old nobility. Living

in France had given him an idea of public spirit unknown in Russia to all above the rank of serfs. It galled his newly acquired pride that one of his own class should suffer affront.

"Well? Why not?" returned his sister coldly.

"Heavens, Marfa! Have you forgotten who he is? Have you sunk to the level of your low-born husband, and become willing to crouch before the Empress's favorite?"

"My low-born husband never has crouched!" she retorted. "Why does Galitzin submit?"

"What could he do? He is helpless to resist such tyranny. A remonstrance, even, would mean Siberia."

Marfa's lip curled.

"That would be terrible indeed!" she sneered.

"No wonder he prefers his hideous bride and the ice-house."

"You talk as if he had any choice."

"Well, I don't know if he has; but do you imagine that Andrei Ivanovitch, whom you despise as a peasant and a coward, would submit to that?"

"He could not escape."

"He would have died!" his wife said proudly.

"Died? But this is no question for the scaffold."

"No! That is all we ever think of, we Russians! If our lives are safe, we will endure

anything, and cringe so low to the hand that strikes us that the striker cannot resist the temptation to strike again. We say: 'It is the will of the Tzar,' and whine like dogs. Do you know that Peter used his staff on all his great nobles, and they thanked him humbly for not inflicting any worse punishment upon them? Only my 'low-born' husband refused to submit."

"But how could he? What did he do?" Vladimir inquired skeptically.

"Old Prince Galitzin told me about it quite lately, before he died. He said: 'We might have known that we could never bend the will of the only man who defied the great Tzar.' Then I asked how he did it; and he answered: 'He is very proud, that German, and he would not take a blow. He swore to Peter that he would kill himself if he was ever touched by the staff, and the Little Father knew he could keep his word.'"

"You seem to admire your husband very much, Marfa."

"I am trying to be just to him."

"But you do not love him, little sister? Her Highness told me so. I had suspected something, but she knows all. Her doctor, Lestocq, is a devil of a fellow for finding out every one's secrets."

"Indeed! So I am the subject of discussion

between the Princess and her doctor. Really, I am infinitely obliged!"

"Don't be angry, Marfiushka! I only mentioned it to show her deep interest in you. She never forgets that we are cousins, nearer, perhaps, than the world knows."

"It is very gracious of her! What does she want?"

"We need your help. I will trust you with something far more precious than my life. Swear that you will not betray me!"

Marfa took the oath lightly. She had guessed that her brother was in love with the Grand Duchess; so she supposed that was the secret he was about to confide to her with such mystery. Then Vladimir brought a gaily lacquered stool to her side, seated himself, and spoke in whispers.

"I have loved her since I first saw her on my return to Russia. She likes me more than the rest, but she fears to show her preference openly. Twice she has been roughly parted from the man she loved, and now they have bent her proud spirit so low that she is afraid of listening to the voice of her heart. Anna would never forgive her marriage with a noble. She grows more jealous of her day by day."

So far the confidence had been exactly what Marfa expected; though the talk of marriage seemed to her moonstruck madness. She bit

her lip, however, and successfully kept back her opinion. An unwise interruption would do more harm than good.

"She chafes at the tyranny of these brutal Germans. The times have changed since her great father came to the throne. We were ignorant children then, and he had to choose foreigners to carry out his far-reaching ideas. Now we are men. We have traveled, seen the world, learnt all that is needed to make a nation great. We have grown too old for leading-strings, we must walk alone."

"What does Pavel think?"

"Oh! He is a dreamer. He could never act. You are different, and that is why I appeal to you. She recognizes your power, and admired the skill with which you helped to overthrow the Dolgoroukis. You have wit and courage, she says, and we have use for both."

"For what?" the sister whispered, leaning closer.

"To proclaim Elisavetta Petrovna Empress!"

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Anna can't live much longer. Lestocq says that she is suffering from a mortal illness. She will leave the throne to her German niece and her German husband, with Bieren as real ruler. Shall we submit to that? Is Russia never to be free and great as other countries? You have

done much to make the power of the Crown absolute; was it that we might be helpless under a foreign yoke?"

Marfa's face flushed. At heart, though she loved Ostermann, she still had much of her old fierce pride in her own country. She knew that even he thought the time was coming when Russia must no longer be governed by strangers.

"Will you act with us, little sister? Elisavetta Petrovna will know how to reward her friends."

The words reminded Marfa of Anna's promise, and the way it had been kept. She knew her husband had less real power now than he had enjoyed under Catherine.

"I must think," she pleaded.

"Very well, but you must think quickly."

Vladimir rose and paced the room. His sister's eyes rested on the stool beside her. Mechanically she traced the pattern—gaudy golden flowers, green leaves, and scarlet tendrils, glowing brightly on the somber black background. Her brother's scheme appealed to her mind much in the same way. The plot was dark enough, it entailed months of secret work that might seem like treachery, and it was bound to end in misery for the losers; but there was the red line of vivid excitement, which her life lacked now, the golden promise of power, the green of hope. If they succeeded, all would be changed. At

last she would get her opportunity of serving Ostermann. He would owe all to her.

The idea filled her with an intoxicating joy. She pictured him, weary, beaten, discouraged, imagining that his career was ended; then she would appear as his good genius, with the promise of the new sovereign's unlimited favor. He would gain far more than he appeared to lose. All the other foreigners, who were his rivals, would be driven out; and he would be supreme.

Any doubts she had, vanished, while she swore eagerly to serve the cause with heart and soul; when they returned sometimes in the darkness of wakeful nights, she consoled herself by arguing that, as there was a conspiracy, it was far better that she should know all; and, in any case, she could not betray her brother.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Failure of Count Ostermann

"A THOUSAND congratulations, Andrei Ivanovitch!" Aunt Tatiana said, as her niece's husband bent to kiss her hand one evening.

"Thanks, my dear aunt! But may I ask what they are for?"

"How can you pretend not to know? Surely the fall of Bieren leaves you supreme in Russia. You are Chancellor of the Empire, too. What more could you desire?"

He smiled rather sadly as he answered:

"You are right, Tatiana Gregorievna. No one could obtain more power. I have reached the summit of my ambition."

Yet, in spite of his words, he did not appear to be in good spirits that evening. He was almost as silent as his wife. Poor Marfa had received the news with a sort of dumb despair. Her vexation was evident to every one, though no one understood its real cause. She felt the ground cut from under her. She had thrown herself into the conspiracy to gain for Ostermann this very thing which he had obtained

without her help. For the first time, she began to be afraid of the future. If her husband were all-powerful, he had nothing to gain, and more to lose. Also he would be bound to suppress the conspiracy if he got a hint of it; so she dared not confess. Her brother's life was at stake: she could not betray him. If she were silent, there was danger for her, too. Ostermann would have to send her to Siberia, if not to the scaffold, and he would never know her motive in supporting the plot. Her horror of Siberia was great, her dread of being misjudged by her husband was greater. She must not fail.

So Marfa and Ostermann were both alike silent that evening, leaving the burden of conversation to Aunt Tatiana, until Nadejda began to play at their joint request. Instinctively she felt that the music of victory and rejoicing would be out of place. She chose instead some plaintive Scotch airs, and then wandered on into Scarlatti's Pastorale, to which the Chancellor listened with content.

It suited well with his mood to-night, carrying him back to the far past of his boyish dreams. How much he had hoped from the future! He was ambitious, conscious of unusual powers, determined to seize the first opening that presented itself. The Dutch admiral,

Cruys, gave him his chance. He was looking out for capable young men with a knowledge of many languages, and he took the untried student with him to Russia. The idea of the vast new country had appealed to the lad. A man must have more opportunity for making his mark there, than in a petty German state.

He remembered the first interview with Peter. He was fresh from University teaching, and inclined to look on the giant Tzar as an unlearned barbarian. Peter did not guess the cause of the young clerk's calm, and was instantly impressed by it. He set him a paper to write—a sort of essay on government—and was astonished at the clearness with which his brain worked amid strange surroundings.

Then he took him into his private service as secretary. Very slowly Ostermann's attitude to his master changed: he learnt to admire the genius of the great ruler, though he despised the weakness of the man. Peter was an idealist, whose ideal was duty. Selfish ambitions ceased to fill the mind of his pupil. He wanted something larger; and, gradually, grew absorbed in his work. If he could win the praise of the greatest Sovereign in the world, he would be content without more solid gain.

He was glad to be transferred to the Foreign Office; for there he saw less of what jarred on

his fastidious senses, and was brought only into contact with the magnificent spirit which prompted Peter's public actions. He had liked the excitement of those early diplomatic struggles. They were merely intricate games of skill for him, though they might mean life or death to his opponents. His mind was clear, untouched by any personal feeling for the country he served. Even the Tzar, he was content to admire coldly, without liking him. It was curious to look back upon.

By degrees habit supplied the want of affection. He grew accustomed to the coarse vulgarity around him. He realized how little it was part of Peter's individuality, how much it was the result of circumstances. He would probably never have shone as a model of refinement. A strong personality seldom fits into the narrow limits of conventional society; but most of what shocked his critical Minister would have been toned down by a different training and other surroundings. When Ostermann understood that fully his admiration grew. By the time that Peter died, Ostermann was ready to grieve less because the world had lost its greatest genius, than for his own personal loss of a friend.

He transferred his devotion to his master's country. Thenceforth Russia was the one ob-

ject of his life. So he had risen step by step, surrounded by rivals, who gave way before him with fear and hatred. His hands remained clean, his brain cool, his heart empty. He was realizing to the full to-night the pathos of the hopeless tragedy of success. He had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. As Aunt Tatiana said, no man could desire more than he had gained. He had reached the goal, the golden apple of triumph was in his hand, and lo! it turned to dust and ashes at his touch.

His position appeared unshakable. He held more power than any one man since the death of Peter. Yet, for the first time, he wondered what good it could bring him. There was nobody to whom his success or failure was of vital moment. His triumph was purely intellectual, not personal. He had no friends to share it. Aunt Tatiana spoke kindly, but that was because her family pride was gratified at being connected with the Chancellor. She did not understand the weariness of the man. Perhaps Nadejda did to a certain degree. Her music seemed to express her sympathy. But Marfa? They had been married for years, and he had done his best to win her confidence, but in vain. He could never overcome her antipathy. It was true that she no longer showed it openly; but she was a woman of the world now, and had learnt to

mask her feelings. Her silence to-night seemed charged with only one meaning to him. She was angry at his triumph.

Yes, his success was merely intellectual, as a man he was a failure. Even intellectually he was dissatisfied. His power was more apparent than real. He could conclude the treaty with England, and make a few slight ameliorations in the hard lot of the common people. That was all. Pavel's young enthusiasms had revived his own dreams. He knew how gigantic was the work to be done, and the knowledge that he could do so little crushed him. He was ill, as well as weary. Soon he would die, and then what would he leave behind him? Not even a name. He would be forgotten by those he had tried to serve. The Empress alone would feel a passing regret that so useful a machine had stopped working; the country would hardly realize even that. Marfa might be glad.

He turned his thoughts with an effort to another question. Peter's name would live for ever in Russian history, while his would never be remembered. What made the difference between them? He was a well-educated, self-controlled man, at an age when the great Tzar was a cowardly, passionate, unlettered lout. How was it that Peter had so far outstripped him? It was easy to talk of genius, but that

explained little. He had known men who seemed to possess it, yet never accomplished anything. Peter might have failed equally, impeded as he was on every side by outward circumstances and inward weakness. He was a coward to begin with. His nerves played strange tricks at critical moments, and he conquered them by sheer strength of will. But where did he get the wish to rise? He was a drunkard, immoral, untaught. How was it that he never gave up the struggle, and sank contentedly into the enjoyment of animal pleasures? There was a strain of madness in his blood, too, which hampered him. His epileptic constitution was even less under his control than was his barbarous nation. With a diseased body, violent, sensual nature, and an unwilling people, ninety-nine men in a hundred would have failed, even with as great a genius. Why had he succeeded?

Ostermann grew interested in the problem. He sought in his well-stored mind for some one with whom to compare the extraordinary figure, which was too near to be rightly judged. He stood apart from all ordinary sovereigns. Most of the great rulers were famous as conquerors. Peter had added immense territories to Russia, but not for the sake of conquest. He thought war was good discipline for his nation, he took no personal delight in it. He made laws, but

not as a great lawgiver would have done. When he saw an evil to be remedied, forth came an ukase, hasty and often injudicious; Peter would not rank with Justinian. He was unlike all emperors and kings; but it struck his pupil suddenly that there were other men who resembled him—Luther and Savonarola: he ranked among the reformers.

It was a strange idea, but it fascinated the tired statesman. There were sufficient points of similarity to outnumber the differences; and it was not difficult to explain away those differences by attributing them to circumstances and surroundings. The most striking quality they had in common, was one he only fully recognized now. Peter was no hypocrite: only Ostermann's eighteenth century skepticism had made it possible for him to suspect that. The Tzar was as sincere as the monks, in his belief in his mission. His faith was real. Was it the secret of his greatness?

The Chancellor was half ashamed to find himself considering such a question seriously. Hitherto he had looked on faith as an intellectual weakness. Marfa had a faith that could move mountains, and her life was spent among marshes. But what if mountains could only be moved by faith? Was that why he had failed? He had climbed a foot-hill, and was

already discouraged by his success. Peter had begun by moving his whole country; and died hopeful, though his task was incomplete.

"Will His Excellency spare a few minutes to a friend who comes on urgent private business?"

Ilja stood before him, bowing low. Ostermann rose.

"Many thanks for your music, Sudarinia. Do you possess the key to our souls?"

Nadejda looked up at him with sympathetic eyes.

"Is it so difficult to guess, that one never attains one's ideal?" she answered in a low voice. "We, most of us, know by experience that fulfilment brings less joy than Hope."

"Believe me, I am very grateful for your sympathy."

Aunt Tatiana did not catch the words. She was growing rather deaf; but she saw the expression on Nadejda's face, and wondered. Had the girl forgotten that her host was Chancellor of the Russian Empire? She looked at him with more pity than at the beggars in the street.

Ostermann went to his cabinet. There he found a tall man, wrapped in a long cloak, waiting near the window. At first he could not distinguish more; for Ilja had only just lighted the pair of candles on the table, and

they burnt feebly. Then the flames grew brighter, and a moment later he recognized his wife's younger brother.

"Pavel! What brings you here?"

"Hush!"

The young man stepped softly to the door, and looked out.

Ostermann smiled.

"There is no one listening."

Pavel dropped his cloak and sat down.

"I have come to warn you, Andrei Ivanovitch. There is a conspiracy on foot against the Throne."

"Yes?"

Ostermann's voice was merely inquiring, not in the least disturbed. Pavel felt reassured in spite of himself.

"Perhaps you knew it already."

"No, this is the first warning I have received. Tell me more. Are you sure that the Throne is aimed at?"

"Yes."

For a few seconds neither spoke. The situation was clear to Ostermann. There could only be danger to the Throne from one quarter. The Grand Duchess was growing ambitious.

"Well?" asked Pavel impatiently.

"Thanks; I will take the necessary precautions."

"Ah! If I might entreat your pity for some of the conspirators!"

Ostermann shot a swift glance at his troubled face.

"I understand. We need not mention names. If the plot goes no further, no one will know who was involved; but if there were an open attempt, which failed, I could do nothing to protect traitors and rebels."

Pavel bit his lip. He wanted to save his brother as well as his brother-in-law. Ostermann should have spared Vladimir out of gratitude to him! Neither of the men guessed, as yet, that Marfa was involved.

"You will do nothing?"

"I will do my best for the safety of the Throne."

"But you would stand coldly by, and do nothing to save—"

"It is far better not to mention names. You will do all you can to urge any friend of yours who may have got mixed up in this affair to draw back before it is too late; but I shall be powerless to protect any one who is publicly proved guilty of high treason."

"You do not care!" the young man exclaimed angrily. "It is nothing to you how we suffer. Marfa told me once that you despised the nobles too much to realize that they are human beings like yourself, and it is true.

I am talking nonsense: no one could accuse you of being human. You are far too great to understand the weakness of humanity. Ah! why did I warn you? What a fool I was to hope for mercy from you! I have betrayed innocent blood like a second Judas, and it is too late for repentance; but, if you will not spare my brother, I can at least share his fate!"

He snatched up his cloak as he spoke, and went before his brother-in-law could decide how to answer him.

Ostermann sat alone, conscious of having failed once more.

He had hoped that Pavel would exert all his power to influence Vladimir to withdraw, and together they might even have prevented the plot from going further; while an offer of pardon would merely have meant utter recklessness on the part of the brothers. Whatever Pavel's theories, in practice he would have been content to know his brother safe, while all the rest were on the way to the scaffold or Siberia. But his words had had a totally unexpected effect, in throwing the impulsive young man into the conspiracy he had been willing to denounce. Still, it might not be impossible to win him back.

Meantime, come what might, Ostermann was

resolved not to adopt the usual policy of seizing all suspected persons, and torturing them until they confessed. Therefore he must keep this knowledge to himself, and do what he could to checkmate the conspirators without warning Anna or Marshal Münnich. He hated violence, and shrank from the prospect of ordering hundreds of miserable wretches to be knouted, beheaded, or sent to Siberia. Russia needed peace: for how could she develop and grow civilized among such horrors? Yet he ran the risk of fresh failure if the plot succeeded. For the first time, he was a traitor to his duty as Minister. Unless Münnich knew all, how could the proper precautions be taken? He was convinced of the disloyalty of the Preobajensky Guards; for they were devoted to Elizabeth, and she must be counting on their help. The Commander-in-Chief could order their removal from the Capital; but would he order it without knowing all?

CHAPTER XXVIII

La Chêtardie's Condition

"WE shall want money," Marfa said. She was wondering if she could sell her jewels secretly to supply the need.

"I have a friend who will provide that," Elizabeth replied.

Vladimir frowned.

"Your Highness refused my offer."

"If I had accepted it, I should have made you happy, but every one else jealous."

"Then, may I ask—?" he began.

"I am not sure that it is wise to tell you; but, after all, it can do little harm. He is a great friend of yours, Marfiushka. Does he do it for your sake or mine?"

"I have asked no one to help us," she answered quickly. Deep down in the bottom of her heart was a lurking doubt as to whether she ought to conspire at all. Since Ostermann had become Chancellor, she had known no peace.

"Then it must be for me! Don't be angry, Vladimir Ivanovitch, he is not my lover. You

know the French King might have married me once, if Count Ostermann had shown himself more willing to negotiate. La Chêtardie tried to arrange that, years ago, when he was here with Monsieur Campredon."

"Is it the Frenchman, then, who supplies the funds?"

"Yes. He has a sentimental idea that he owes me a crown. He thinks that it was his stupidity that lost me the chance of being his Queen, so he wishes now to make me Empress instead."

She sprang up, and curtsied low to her own reflection in a long mirror.

"I have the honor to present myself to Tzaritza Elisavetta!" she said, laughing. "Why, Marfa, how serious you look!"

"I don't understand why a foreigner should interfere in our concerns. Let us choose our Empress without the help of the French."

"Marfa is right, Your Highness," Vladimir murmured softly. "Our real treasure is the gold of your hair, the sapphires of your eyes, the priceless rubies that form your perfect lips."

"Flatterer! Alas! such rewards cannot be given to all. There is always some one too jealous to share. But money, my cousin, has less exacting lovers."

Pavel stood by gravely. He overheard snatches of the softly spoken talk, and was pained. Great movements should have worthier representatives than these.

"I believed that we were working to throw off a foreign yoke, gracious Princess. How can we do that if we are under a burden of debt to France?"

"But, my wise dreamer of noble dreams, we shall owe nothing to France. La Chêtardie acts as a private friend."

"For a private end!" persisted Pavel.

"What an inquisitor you would make! They should take you into the Secret Police. Why should you not believe that he does it from a chivalrous desire to right my wrongs?"

"Has he made no terms, then?"

"Fie! Still doubting, Pavel? Is this your English training? Vladimir says that at Oxford you were at the College of the Queen: a Queen's man should be more complimentary to an Empress."

"Has Monsieur de la Chêtardie asked for no reward?"

"My little Marfa is as skeptical as her philosophic brother! But I guess why. He told me that he adored you, and believed we might confide safely in your discretion. That was why Vladimir came to you. No, he hopes to

win his reward from fairer hands than mine. The only favor he sought from me is a grim one. It seems he had an enemy when he was here before, and he wants revenge."

"Who was it?" Ostermann's wife asked breathlessly.

"I don't know yet, but I fancy it was Münnich. The gallant Field Marshal has always been as deadly to women's peace of mind as he is to that of men on the battlefield; and there was a Madame Desanges here under the protection of the French Embassy."

"Yes, I remember," Marfa said carelessly. She had never liked the little woman, and she did not care if the quarrel was about her. Münnich she loathed; for he had dared to make love to her without any encouragement.

"Monsieur de la Chêtardie is hardly generous in making conditions," Vladimir observed.

"Perhaps not, but it relieves me from the weight of gratitude. You, my children, ask nothing now; so I will give you all that is in my power when I am Empress. Don't forget that, Marfiushka, when you have a favor to obtain for the man you love. He shall get all you desire—provided he be not the Frenchman's enemy."

She laughed lightly as she made the reservation. No one could be sure whom Marfa loved,

for there was no scandal about her. Though La Chêtardie had hinted at his hopes, Elizabeth was inclined to think that Lindsay would have the best chance.

Marfa laughed, too, and withdrew. There was no fear now for Ostermann; and, perhaps, after all, it was well for him that she was among the conspirators. Otherwise, he would certainly have lost his office; for the Grand Duchess did not seem to like him overmuch. It would be a little strange to see Ministers changing because the Crown was passing once more from one head to another. Yet Marfa foresaw that some were likely to fall into disgrace with the new Sovereign. They would, of course, be offered their choice of serving her, or retiring into private life; but a few who had lined their pockets sufficiently would pose as incorruptible servants of the late Empress, and resign. She did not think that Ostermann would do that: he was too devoted to Russia to refuse her further service.

On her return home, Marfa found a visitor awaiting her. It was La Chêtardie; and something in his face warned her of coming trouble, though he was chatting gaily enough to Aunt Tatiana. He advanced to meet her, and bowed low enough over her hand to kiss the tips of her fingers.

"At last we meet again, Madame! I have been oppressed by the remembrance of my debt, and yet I have had no opportunity of paying it in person. Has your niece told you, Madame, that she won large sums from me at Court a few nights ago?" he added, turning to Aunt Tatiana.

That old-fashioned lady looked scandalized; she disapproved sternly of gambling; and Marfa frowned. She grasped the position as quickly as her husband would have done. Elizabeth had warned her that La Chêtardie was going to supply the money; and for some reason, not quite clear, he had chosen her to act as intermediary. She was vexed at having to take an important part in the plot. It would be more difficult to explain away afterwards to Ostermann; and she foresaw quarrels with her aunt about her supposed recklessness in playing for such high stakes.

"Let me see, two thousand ducats was the exact sum, I believe. Perhaps you will share it with your partner, as I am not on calling terms there just now."

Marfa took the money reluctantly. It could not be helped. La Chêtardie was right not to mix himself up publicly in this affair.

"Thanks, Monsieur, I will arrange all that."

"The sooner the better, Madame; for my delay may have caused embarrassment in that quarter.

Now, I fear, I must tear myself away from you charming society. May I hope to see you to-morrow morning? I hear that Marshal Münnich has made up his mind to send the Preobajenskys to the Frontier, he thinks barrack life unhealthy for them; and they are to march at dawn."

"Indeed!" Aunt Tatiana exclaimed. "We had heard nothing of that."

"No, the orders are not yet issued to the Guards; but the gallant Marshal told a friend of his just now. He is so thoughtful for ladies, and he knew she would enjoy the spectacle."

La Chêtardie bowed, smiling, to all the ladies, and went towards the door. Marfa answered his farewell with one word:

"Good-night!"

"Beaux rêves, Madame! May your night be pleasant!"

"Well, I never heard any one say good-night at this hour in the afternoon!" said Aunt Tatiana. "Really, Marfa, your choice of words is as singular as the rest of your conduct!"

"Don't scold me, little aunt! I am so tired that I suppose I thought it was later than it is. I think that I shall go to bed immediately after supper."

"You should not overdo yourself as you do. I

saw you this morning going up and down on those crazy snow mountains for an hour. I really wonder no one is killed over that childish game. The good God made the earth flat, that no one need fall, and you silly people go and build up slopes as high as a house, for the sake of risking your necks sliding down."

Marfa made no answer, but retired to her own room to change her dress for supper. They were to be alone this evening, for a wonder: so she could get into a comfortable loose robe of soft silk, in place of the stiff brocade she had worn during all the afternoon. She felt nervous and anxious, now that the crisis was at hand. La Chêtardie's warning about the Guards meant that the conspirators must act at once.

"It is long since we have seen Pavel," Ostermann observed at supper. He was vexed at having had no chance to regain his lost influence over the young man.

"He is ill," returned his sister curtly.

"Ill? I thought—"

"That delicacy was peculiar to diplomats?" Marfa retorted.

"Why not bring him here to be nursed?" her husband suggested quietly. "Without doubt he would recover more quickly under your care than he can alone."

"He has Vladimir to look after him."

"Vladimir must be too busy in attendance on the Grand Duchess to have time to devote himself to his brother."

"Nothing would ever separate them," Marfa returned defiantly. "We are all united, and stand or fall together."

Decidedly she was not made for a successful conspirator. Ostermann looked at her keenly, then a shade passed over his face. This was far worse than he had imagined. Before his mind, loomed terrible visions of scaffolds, tortures, mutilations, and Siberia. He must save her if possible, at any price. But would it be possible, even for him? The Romanoffs mere merciless when frightened, and the bare idea of such a plot would terrify Anna. He recovered his calm with an effort. Something might still be done to detach the Streshnieffs before it was too late.

"Your family affection is as beautiful as it is rare among Russians of your class. I congratulate you, Marfa," he said.

"The silly child has filled her head so full of foreign nonsense that she no longer behaves like a woman of our class," Aunt Tatiana grumbled

The Chancellor glanced at her sharply. Was she, too, in the conspiracy? Well, at any rate, he saw a chance of playing his best card.

"I am afraid that those born in other lands can never really understand your great ladies," he answered.

"What do you mean, Andrei?" the old lady asked expectantly. She was fond of gossip, and her nephew's tone suggested delightful possibilities.

"Their tastes are so curiously simple. Empress Anna preferred the son of a German groom to any of her own kinsmen, and the Grand Duchess—" Marfa drew her breath sharply—"is married to one of her choir singers."

"Elisavetta Petrovna!"

The three women were almost equally excited: Aunt Tatiana, for the sake of the scandal; Marfa, because she felt indignant with her husband for uttering such a gratuitous lie; and Nadejda, who felt something was very seriously wrong, or he would not have told them this. What was it, she wondered.

"I suppose you mean Rasumoffski," Marfa said after a moment's silence.

"Yes."

"I don't believe it!"

"Had you really dreamed that Vladimir might wear the crown some day?"

"He will yet do so with a worthier bride," Aunt Tatiana threw in. She was only thinking of the marriage crown."

Ostermann smiled, but his eyes searched his wife's face. Would she understand, and draw back in time?

"Tell him that his hopes are vain,'" he urged.

"Is that all I am to say?" she replied hesitatingly. How much did he know? she asked herself. Was this meant as a warning? or a threat?

"Add what you like, I cannot say more."

His duty forbade him to tell her that the Guards were going to be sent away to-morrow: so the plot must fail. He would not betray the Crown, even to save his wife. He never guessed that Münnich had already given away the secret to a woman who was La Chêtardie's new agent in place of Madame Desanges.

Marfa had been so pale before supper that the terror she felt now made little impression on her face. Aunt Tatiana noticed nothing at all; and even Ostermann's keen eyes told him only that his words had gone home. He hoped for the best result, not knowing that his wife was now powerless to withdraw. The thought of the money entrusted to her was agony: she must deliver it, and so compromise herself irrevocably. If the plot failed, all was lost. She would go to Siberia, after a public knouting, and the loss of her tongue probably; while her brothers would be lucky if they suffered

death. Her husband had evidently done all he meant to do in warning her. After this he would stand aside, leaving her to her fate. The worst of it was that he would never understand her motives

CHAPTER XXIX

The Midnight Crisis

ELIZABETH was sitting late in council that night. Her French doctor, Lestocq, had just brought word of the orders to the Guards; and they all knew the moment for action had come. Only five of her most devoted servants were present: the doctor; Vorontzoff, the Chamberlain; Schwarz, her old music-master; Alexis Razumoffski, the handsome Cossack, whose wonderful voice had earned him a place in her choir before it had won her heart; and Vladimir and his brother.

"Anna evidently suspects something," the Grand Duchess was saying. "She spoke harshly to me at Court this morning, and this news confirms my fears."

"It is Count Ostermann who is playing upon her terrors," Lestocq snarled. "He is at the root of all evil to you. Now he is having La Chêtardie watched so closely that he is unable to deliver the money he promised. I had a word with him this morning, and he

hinted that he would try to send it through Countess Ostermann; but he is beginning to suspect her of playing a double game, so he may not have judged that prudent."

"Miserable cur! Do you dare to imply that my sister is a traitor?" Vladimir thundered.

"She would not be the only one in your family."

"What do you mean?" Vladimir insisted passionately, his hand on his sword. The strain of this crisis affected him less than the attitude his beloved was adopting to Razumoffski; the two together roused him to fury.

"Hush, my friends!" Elizabeth interposed firmly. "This is not the moment for quarrels. If we do not get the money this evening, we are lost."

"Then you are saved, my Empress!" said a newcomer, pushing aside the curtain which hung over the door.

All the men sprang to their feet, drawing their swords, but the stranger advanced, undismayed, into the circle of light, waving aside Razumoffski's blade.

"Marfa!"

"Madame la Comtesse! When one speaks of an angel—you all know the proverb," was Lestocq's greeting.

"I could not come sooner without exciting suspicion. I had to dress as a man, or

I could not have got through the streets at this hour. Here is the money, and La Chêtardie told me that the Preobajenski—"

"Yes, we know," said the Grand Duchess, embracing her cousin warmly. "We shall owe everything to you for your prompt action, my little Marfa. Lestocq! Go at once to the barracks, and bring back twenty of the non-commissioned officers to serve as my escort when I go there to call out the men. And—wait!—see that the drums are slit up while you are there, that no alarm may be given."

She had become a different woman, in the face of immediate danger. Her courage inspired her followers with fresh hope; her resourceful brain astonished them. The Frenchman hurried away on his important mission, and Elizabeth turned to the others.

"You will wait here until the men come. Then I shall want your help. Remember that we are striking in a holy cause—for the freedom of our beloved country from the hateful foreign yoke. There must be no avoidable bloodshed. I shall rely on you to restrain the troops."

"You can trust us to the death, my Princess!" exclaimed Vladimir.

Elizabeth repaid him with a smile.

"Now I shall go to my own room, to pray for

a blessing on our cause. Will you come with me, Marfa?"

The two women retired. The men were alone.

"Shall we pray also?" suggested Razumoffski shyly.

Vladimir's lip curled in an ugly sneer.

"Are we women or children?" he asked contemptuously.

"No, but we are Russians, and shall fight better for knowing that the Saints will protect us."

"Moujiks may; we of the nobility can protect ourselves."

"Perhaps that is why you call us chrestianin," the other returned quietly. "The great princes look out for themselves, and submit to the conquerors whose religion they adopt; while we trust only in God, and never forsake our faith."

Vladimir scowled. This man's freedom of speech was so unusual in one born a serf, that he felt it must spring from the certainty of exceptional favor with his mistress; and the conviction was gall to Elizabeth's well-born lover. Pavel interposed before more could be said.

"The Grand Duchess reminded us that this was no time to think of personal matters. Do not let us disobey her by quarreling, when

she is absent praying for us and our holy country. We should forget all petty distinctions in the service of our Motherland. To-night we are no longer noble or freed-men, but Russians."

The appeal silenced the rivals. Vladimir bit his lip, and said no more. It would do him harm if Schwarz or Vorontzoff reported the scene to Elizabeth. As to Razumoffski, he was naturally peaceable, and quite willing to be friends with everybody. This evening he was depressed and anxious about the safety of the woman he loved. He was not eager to win her a crown; for that seemed to him likely to separate them. The husband of an Empress should be a great prince, not an ignorant peasant. He could never be acknowledged, and might, in time, be looked on as an incumbrance.

They united in silence now; since words were dangerous when nerves were at such a tension, the merest whisper might act as a spark on gunpowder, and produce an explosion. The minutes crawled by, weighted with the fate of an Empire. What had happened to Lestocq? Could he have failed? Were the Guards less devoted to Peter's daughter than every one believed? She had nursed them when they were wounded, danced with them, given dowries to

their brides, stood as godmother to their children. Surely they would not fail her now, when failure meant life-long imprisonment for her, and death for her friends! Yet, who could say? The instinct of loyalty was strong. Russians were not accustomed openly to set aside their nominal ruler. Peter's sister, the great Sophia, had not dared to attempt that, though she was supported by the savage Strelitzi. Were the Preobajenski more lawless?

Though time seemed to the anxious conspirators to lag, it was not in reality long before the French doctor returned with twenty picked men of the Grenadier Guards. Elizabeth came out to meet them, radiant and resolute.

"My children, can I trust you in everything?"

"To the death, little mother!" they answered, speaking with one accord.

Razumoffski gave a sigh of mingled relief and regret.

"Then go and call your comrades together. I am coming to the barracks immediately to lead them. See that they assemble quietly. We dare not fail."

"We shall not fail, little mother. You need not be afraid."

They tramped out, and the Grand Duchess turned once more to her friends.

"I will not take you all with me. Pavel, you must see your sister home. No, Marfa, I will not take you. You shall not be compromised if we fail. You have done enough to earn your reward if we succeed. Believe me, I shall not forget."

"I cannot leave Your Highness: it would be cowardly for me to seek safety now."

"Then draw your cap lower, and hold up your cloak to screen your face. I will not begin my reign by letting it appear that I have brought marriage into contempt, and taught a wife to fight against her husband."

"But we are not fighting against Count Ostermann: he is only a servant of the Crown."

"A nice quibble, Madame," Elizabeth replied coldly. She was shocked by the public display of private spite.

Marfa understood, and drew back.

"Your Highness is right. I will go home."

"Lestocq, you may come in my sledge."

"Has Your Highness accepted my advice as to the coat of mail?"

"No, I am not a coward. I share the risks that my comrades run."

"But your life is far more precious than any other," pleaded Razumoffski. "If we lost you, we lose all. You must put on the armor."

There was something like command in his

tone, as he uttered the last sentence. In his anxiety for his wife's safety, he was in danger of forgetting the respect due to the future Empress. Elizabeth frowned. This was not the moment to proclaim their secret. Yet, in her heart, she loved him better because she knew that it was the woman he cared for, not the future Empress.

"I will yield then, for this once, but I do not like to be bullied by my servants. As a punishment, I shall leave you here, Alexis Gregorievitch, to guard the house in my absence. Count Ostermann will send to arrest me if he has got news of our attempt: so you must watch well, and let no one enter."

In a few minutes she was ready to start, with Lestocq in the sledge beside her, and Vladimir following with Vorontzoff. Pavel went with Marfa. The night was bitterly cold. The frost gave clearness to every sound. They walked in silence, their footsteps muffled by the deep snow, their ears straining to catch any unusual sound. What was happening at the barracks now? Would there be any fighting? Was Vladimir in danger? Then their thoughts flew on before them to the Chancellor's house. Had he been alarmed? Perhaps he had discovered Marfa's absence, and they would both be arrested on arrival. The idea of Siberia lost some of its ter-

rors for Marfa that night, being swallowed up by a greater dread. Elizabeth had spoken as if the attack were directed against Ostermann. Was it true, as La Chêtardie hinted, that she hated him? Would she refuse to keep him in power at his wife's request? Was her dream vain? Would the success of the conspirators mean ruin for the man she loved?

The thought was agony, the silence of suspense intolerable. Marfa longed to shriek aloud, to rouse the sleepers behind those shuttered windows, and order them to rally round the endangered government. But she knew it was too late. The rabble would be powerless against the soldiers. She must wait, helpless, trusting to the Princess's promise. She could, in any case, secure his personal safety; and he might be glad of rest. He was ill, and needed care and freedom from his heavy labors.

Marfa regained her rooms without diffi-culty. Pavel would have gone, but she begged him to stay. She was frightened, and dared not be alone. In a few minutes he was convinced that it was right to remain; for the house was quietly surrounded by troops, and an officer entered to take away Ostermann as a prisoner. Nadejda woke, hearing the muffled tramp of men, and looked forth from her window on a pile of bayonets glittering in the

moonlight. What could it mean? Her eyes searched the horizon for sign of distant flames or smoke; but the quiet stars shone down undimmed by veils of man's making. The city slept under the unclouded sky. A revolution always brought fire and tumult. There was no hint of either to-night in the still air.

Outside the soldiers stood like statues, silent and motionless, though the frost froze the blood in their veins. It seemed long to them before the Chancellor came out, entered the waiting sledge, and was driven away to the grim fortress prison, whence so few returned to liberty. Nadejda did not see them go; for her door was flung violently open, and Marfa rushed in, pale with horror.

"I have killed him!" she moaned, throwing herself into a chair, and covering her face with her hands.

Nadejda limped towards her, bewildered dread written on her countenance.

"What has happened, little sister?"

"Don't touch me, Nadejda! I am a murderess!"

Her friend paid no heed to the wild words, but, sinking on her knees, put her arms tenderly round her friend. It was hardly possible that she had really killed Ostermann. Of late, she had seemed more disposed to admire

and appreciate him. Yet why were these soldiers at the door? Could it be true? If it were, then this poor creature whom she held in her arms must be mad. Nadejda knew that she would not have committed such a crime deliberately.

Marfa shook with dry hard sobs, trembling from head to foot; but the friendly clasp soothed her by degrees, and she looked up at last.

"You must help me. Pray for him, dear; the Saints will hear you. They have taken him to prison, and he will die there. Oh! Why was I born?"

"Who is it, darling?" Then a light flashed across her brain. "Is it Ostermann? Is he arrested?"

"That was the Grand Duchess's order. She never told me. I tried to save him. I begged the Captain to guard him here. He could not have escaped, I implored him on my knees to let me speak to him for one moment; but it was all in vain. They have taken him to prison, and he will kill himself to escape torture. Oh! I know that—he is a coward. But it will be my sin, not his. Pray that the Saints may punish me, and not him."

"But how can it be your fault, dearest? I do not understand."

"How can you? How could any one imagine that there could be such a wicked woman as I am? But I did not mean it. Oh! I did not mean it!"

She hid her face again, sobbing, and Nadejda did her best to comfort her.

"I could not bear to say: 'Forgive me, I have been a proud, vain, ignorant fool, unworthy to be your slave, but I love you.' He was as high above me as the Tzar is above the meanest peasant. He would have spurned me as I did him in my childish folly. No! He would not have done that; for he is always gentle, kindly, and chivalrous; but I should have felt that he despised me. I could not have borne his contempt, Nadejda."

Then she told all, and her friend strove to soothe her. She did not point out how much Marfa could have done if she had been content to work loyally with her husband. Her experience of life had taught her that the might-have-beens are best left unconsidered; they are generally obvious, and seldom consoling. Even when things might have been worse, the horrible possibility is not cheering to dwell on.

"We will pray for him together Marfa; and you will go to the Grand Duchess as soon as it is light. She may have failed; the town is so quiet that I cannot believe she has suc-

ceeded. In any case, her success will not be entirely owing to you. The plot would have existed without your knowledge; and, perhaps your share in it may have earned you the right to save your husband's life."

CHAPTER XXX

Life or Death

PAVEL spent a wakeful night, tormented by a hundred torturing doubts. Had the conspiracy succeeded? If so, had it saved Russia, or only riveted her chains? It would be no gain to pass from German to French hands. Was it wise to create the precedent of palace revolution? Would the throne ever be safe again from the turbulent ambition of those nearest to it? If this were the beginning of a series of plots against the Crown, then the last state of Russia would be worse than the first. The Sovereign would be more tyrannical, for fear that his life was menaced; and tyranny would lead to fresh conspiracy. It seemed to Pavel, in those long, dark hours, as if he had thrust his country into a vicious circle from which there could be no escape.

With the dawn, the gloomy forebodings of brother and sister vanished like chilly mists before the sun. Pavel went out just before eight, as soon as it was light, to reconnoiter the capital, and returned with the news of

the complete success of Elizabeth's supporters. She was being proclaimed Empress at that moment, he announced; and the roar of a hundred guns confirmed his tidings. The streets began to fill with curious people, who cheered loudly when they heard the reason of the salute. Until then none of the ordinary inhabitants had known of the revolution which had taken place while they slept.

Aunt Tatiana was as excited as a girl, and full of questions. She did not guess the part her nephew and niece had played; but she hoped for great things for Vladimir. Ostermann's warning that Elizabeth was already married had passed from her mind. In any case, a man of the people need not count. He could be easily put aside. Only Nadejda sat by, pale and anxious. No one needed her any longer. Marfa was happy, and Ostermann beyond the reach of comfort. He was alone, suffering in mind and body, and she could do nothing. Her helplessness had never seemed so bitter before.

A few hours later, Marfa went to the palace, where she found the new Empress surrounded by new courtiers, and busy conferring honors and rewards on all her favorites.

"Welcome, Marfa Ivanovna! I will speak to you later in private."

Marfa curtsied low, and drew back. She was not anxious to attract the attention of this crowd, until she could explain her errand. She took refuge near a window, where she stood half hidden by the heavy folds of the curtain.

"Madame la Comtesse! This is indeed an unlooked-for pleasure!"

Marfa turned to meet La Chêtardie's curious eyes. For the moment her mind was so centered on her coming interview with the Empress, that this meeting aroused no interest.

"Yours is a marvelous country, Madame! The Crown passes like a child's toy from one to another, without the nation having any special interest in the event. It seems a mere dream. We go to sleep under Anna, and wake to find Elizabeth on the throne; yet no one is the worse, not a sword is red, nor a gun fired in anger. It is marvelous!"

"Still it was no surprise to you, Monsieur."

"Why not? I gave you a few little pieces of gold, because your poor cousin had not money to buy clothes. Who could have guessed that she would use it to buy ermine? That royal fur was cheap at two thousand ducats!"

"In your land, the people are not consulted in their choice of a Sovereign."

"Not in ordinary times; but when one King tries to seize the throne from another, it means

war. Our good Henry of Navarre spent much blood and treasure, not to speak of a change of religion, before he could win the Crown. Here all goes as in a play: enter the rightful Princess, exit the usurper and her evil counselors. Truly the Russians are a wonderful nation, and great is the power of beauty!"

"Yes, I suppose that it is strange to make a revolution without fighting; but the Empress is merciful and opposed to violence."

La Chêtardie was examining her curiously all this time. Not the least strange incident of the day, to his mind, was the unblushing appearance of the wife of a fallen Minister. He admired Marfa, but regretted her bad taste. It marred her perfection.

"It is true that we have not reached the last act of the play. Is the end tragic, after all?"

"You do not think the new Empress's power assured?"

Much might depend on that.

"Oh! She is safe enough, Madame," he answered, lightly shrugging his shoulders. "The Irish General was her only danger, and you have heard his saying?"

"No. What was it?"

"They went to him before daybreak, to ask on which side he would fight, and he answered, though still half asleep, 'I am always for those

in power.' There was no fear for the Empress after that."

"Then how could the last act be a tragedy?"

Marfa's voice was calm enough, though the beating of her heart nearly choked her as she waited for the reply.

"It was a mere phrase, used thoughtlessly. You would not see anything sad in the downfall of your enemies; but to the conventional mind, the idea of sudden death is always appalling, and on my honor, I pity the poor devils who will meet it."

"You think—The Empress surely cannot—"

Marfa raised her hand to her head. She would not believe that cruel execution could follow a victory won so peacefully. La Chêtardie watched her, puzzled. Russian women were savages, and it was, therefore, difficult to follow the workings of their minds. This beautiful creature, whom he had just been accusing of bad taste in shamelessly flaunting her joy in her husband's ruin, appeared likely to fall into the opposite extreme. Marfa regained her self-control with an effort.

"I am too stupid to understand, Monsieur, why there should be executions. Who could suffer from the accession of our gracious Empress?"

"Perhaps it is I who am stupid, Madame.

My foreign training made me view everything in a story light. Doubtless on this stage all is managed differently, and the comedy becomes a farce. You see, in France the Ministers of the deposed Sovereign—"

"But they have committed no crime."

"They have fallen from power; it is the one offense for which there is no pardon."

"They might serve the Crown still, like General Lacy."

Now that her fears were given voice by another, they seemed ludicrous, incredible.

"Do you really believe that they would be offered the choice? Need the certainty of their death affect you? It is not a personal matter, I hope."

Marfa's eyes flashed.

"You forget, Monsieur, that my husband is among the fallen."

"And that grieves you!" he murmured with mock tenderness. "What a generous heart to spare pity even for a husband!"

"Monsieur!"

"Ah! my dear Countess! Do not trouble to play a part before me. I could not admire you more than I do already."

"Your words are an insult at such a moment."

"Pardon me, Madame! I find your Russian code of manners so difficult to understand that

I sin against it unconsciously. Why, if I may be permitted to inquire, are you here to-day, unless to show your joy in being free to accept the homage of your humble worshipers?"

"I am here to implore the Empress's favor for my husband."

La Chêtardie restrained his laughter out of courtesy.

"Excellent, Comtesse! That is, I think, the finest touch in this brilliantly played piece. Well, I happen to know that you will fail. May I hope to have the privilege of consoling you?"

"Why should I fail?" Marfa demanded haughtily.

"Because, as I had the honor to observe the other day, your new Empress hates Count Ostermann more than we do."

"You hate him? Is it he that—? You made a condition before lending the money, was it—?"

"Yes, Madame, it was."

A long silence fell between them, while all around the babble of talk and gay laughter went on unceasingly. La Chêtardie wondered at her stillness. He was painfully aware that his path in diplomatic life was strewn with blunders; but he prided himself on his unerring capacity for gauging the hearts of women. Now he owned himself at a loss to account for

Marfa's tragic expression. Was she no audacious comedian, as he had imagined, but a woman crushed by the discovery that she had brought ruin to the man she loved? It was a fantastic idea, but one could believe anything of this strange race. Yet it piqued his vanity to suppose that Marfa could prefer another to his charming self, and that other her husband!

Marfa felt that she must know more. She could not wait until she saw the Empress. Suspense was torture. How hard was his condition? She must know that at once. Then she remembered that La Chêtardie had just suspected her of playing a part. He believed her anxiety feigned. Well, she would take the hint, and act now. Her calmly indifferent voice surprised herself as she said:

"Then you have asked your favor?"

"I am here to receive the answer now."

Marfa's laugh sounded forced; but La Chêtardie understood that the moment was critical, in any case for her.

"I suppose that it would be indiscreet to inquire further, Monsieur? Yet you will readily admit that I have a personal interest in the matter."

She was grateful for the buzz of conversation near them, which covered all the deficiencies of her tone. Her heart was beating so loudly

that he must have heard it had they been alone.

"You wish to know if you are to share in Russia's freedom from the German yoke?"

"Does that surprise you? Have you not heard the story of my marriage? It was a political affair, arranged by the first Peter. Why should I not be eager to know if it—"

Her voice failed her; and the lace frill with which she was playing nervously, tore into rags.

The Marquis felt a sudden suspicion darken his mind. Was he quite mistaken in her? Had she a favored lover?

"Is there some fortunate man who will win the highest stake we have played for?"

She gave him one swift glance and blushed.

"Can you not guess?" she answered softly, and hated herself for the implied lie.

"Ah, Comtesse! I had not dared to hope."

He came a step nearer, and would have pressed her hand to his lips; but she drew it away.

"You forget, Monsieur, that I am here to plead for my imprisoned husband; and we are watched by a hundred curious eyes."

"You are right a thousand times, my all-beautiful lady! But I must see you alone. When can I have that supreme happiness?"

"You have not earned it yet. Tell me all I wish to know."

He shrank a little from her. This thirst for blood sickened him more than the careless flaunting triumph which had shocked his refined taste half an hour before; though the idea that it was due to her passion for him should have flattered his vanity.

"I have asked for the wheel, my lovely Roman Empress. Does that satisfy your craving?"

The wheel! It was the most cruel death a man could die. Ostermann would never have the courage to face it. He would kill himself in prison: so his pardon, if she could win it from the Empress, would come too late. She reeled, as if struck by a heavy blow, caught at the curtain for support, felt it slip through her nerveless fingers, saw the room whirling into darkness, and fell fainting on the floor.

It was some time before she opened her eyes to find herself on a couch in the Empress's room, and to see that good-natured woman bending over her.

"My poor little cousin! I never guessed that you were anxious about any one, or I would have seen you sooner. Here, take a sip of this vodka, and you will feel better. Now, what is it? Has your handsome Lindsay proved

less wise than Lacy? I promise you a full pardon for him. The gallant Marquis believes that you are dying for his beaux yeux, but I back the Scotchman for the first place in your favor."

"I want no favors for either of them; but the man I love is in deadly peril, and it will break my heart if anything happens to him."

"What, another! Oh, Marfiushka! This is very shocking! Well, never mind! Tell me all about him."

CHAPTER XXXI

The Triumph of Count Ostermann

THE severity of the sentence pronounced on the fallen Ministers took educated Russians by surprise. Many great men had fallen before, but always through their own misdeeds. The Sovereign had often punished cruelly, but always with some semblance of justice; there was none this time. Marfa was not alone in her miscalculation. Every one had expected that the Ministers would pass with the Crown from one mistress to another, like the Irish general.

The common people cared little. They hated the foreigners, and loved Elizabeth. They were surprised that Ostermann, alone, should be sentenced to be broken on the wheel, since his colleagues were equally guilty of his chief crime—that of being born an alien. Still it would add to the excitement of the day, especially as he was supposed to be a coward: so they flocked to the execution with eager interest.

From early dawn, the crowds gathered in the great square of the Vassiloffski. In the

middle rose a high scaffold; and there disappointment met the first arrivals, for there was no sign of the wheel, only two low blocks. Men of another nation would have murmured, but the Russians have little of the tiger in their disposition. They consoled themselves by remembering that it would be less painful for the victim, against whom they had no special grudge. Probably the headsman's ax would terrify him enough for their amusement.

The troops marched up, and formed round the scaffold. There were six thousand armed men to guard the ten who were to die. The bright winter sun, glittering on their accoutrements, made a brave show for the loyal subjects of the new Empress. Only Marfa grew pale, as she stood watching at an open window. Had there been some mistake? Was he to die by the ax, or—? She had heard nothing of her husband for days, and Elizabeth had refused to let her communicate with him: so an icy fear froze her heart.

At ten o'clock, the firing of a gun gave the long-awaited signal. Every head turned in the direction of the sound, a sigh of pleasurable anticipation ran through the crowd. They gave way before a mounted troop, forming a long lane from the prison to the foot of the high scaffold. Between the living walls of this lane,

walked the prisoners, one by one, each accompanied by two soldiers. First came the Marshal, lady-killer to the last, dressed in his most gorgeous uniform, and wearing a new cloak over his shoulders; for the day was bitterly cold. After him came Lowenwald, once the smartest of Court dandies, now haggard, ragged, and unkempt. Last of all came Ostermann, seated in a sledge because of his illness, dressed as Marfa had seen him when at work, and with much the same expression. One quick glance, he gave to the preparations for the journey's end, and his face grew even calmer. He had dreaded the prolonged torture of the wheel.

They halted at the foot of the long ladder leading up, as Münnich said, to heaven; and there were arranged in a half-circle to listen, bareheaded, to their sentence. Ostermann, still in the sledge, listened to the lengthy accusations with a smile. He appreciated its humor more than his fellow victims did. At the conclusion he looked up, shrugging his shoulders, but not at the block this time; as if drawn by a magnet, his eyes sought those which had been watching him since he came in sight. Marfa's whole face was glowing with happy pride. He was proving his courage to the world. Henceforth none would ever dare to call him coward.

Ostermann could not guess the real reason of her joy. His smile faded, and he turned once more to the scaffold, feeling that the bitterest drop had been added to his cup. Quietly he mounted the steep steps, helped by his attendant soldiers. Quietly he laid his head on the block, without even a glance at the ax which the executioner was taking out of its bag. Whether the blade was sharp or blunt mattered little. An extra blow or two would make no real difference.

The Secretary to the Senate spoke again.

"God and the Empress give thee back thy life!"

The crowd applauded generously. After all, the sight of a brave man dying without a word was no pleasure. The late Chancellor rose, buttoned his collar, and said, with the slightly amused smile called forth by the sentence:

"In that case, will you give me back my cap?"

The executioner laughed. Jests seldom came his way. The other prisoners were spared the solemn farce of reaching the block. They were told that the gracious clemency of the Empress had commuted the just judgment of the Senate to perpetual banishment to Siberia; a distinction being made in the difference of their destinations. Ostermann was to go to Berezoff, the region of perpetual snow. Münnich gave his guards the purseful of ducats which

he had intended for the headsman; and the onlookers applauded once more. One of his companions wept aloud with joy at the prospect of dragging out the rest of his life in dreary exile. Ostermann looked at him curiously. It was not his idea of happiness.

An hour later, the fallen Chancellor sat alone in his prison cell. His head rested on his hands. He had given himself up to the bitterness of despair. The Empress's clemency was wanton cruelty in his eyes. One quick stroke would have ended everything. Now he had before him the horrors of the terrible journey to Siberia, and after that, years, perhaps, of utter loneliness, cut off from human sympathy. He was not likely to die speedily; for Siberia was not unhealthy. He would be alone, suffering, unoccupied. The mere thought of it was dreadful. What would the reality be? He had worked so hard all his life, that merely resigning office would have been a trial; though he had sometimes wished to do that, when he was out of health and in low spirits.

He tried to persuade himself that he would be allowed to take some books with him, and even paper to write down some of his experiences in the past. But he realized, with something of surprise, that the loneliness would try him more than all. He was used to living among people

full of varied interests. He had hardly shared their life, but he had watched it as the spectator of a moving drama. Comedy and tragedy had been played before him by the finest actors on the greatest stage. For the future, he was condemned to see no one but the brutal ignorant men who guarded him. A philanthropist might have found them as interesting as other human beings, but Ostermann was only a philanthropic statesman, and a prisoner. It would have been difficult for any one except a Christian martyr to return their brutality with kindly affection.

His thoughts wandered to the surroundings he had left for ever. He regretted his faithful Ilja, who had done his duty so well for twenty years; Aunt Tatiana, whose friendliness had made his house more like the home of which he had dreamed before his marriage; Nadejda, whose music had given him such pleasure. He even thought tenderly of Marfa. Poor child! Their marriage was a heavy chain to her. No wonder if she had rejoiced at the prospect of freedom! She was young, beautiful, passionate; yet she had never brought shame upon his name. The executioner's ax would have severed her bonds, and left her free to marry Lindsay. Well, at least, she shared his grief for once. Poor Marfa!

The door opened noisily; the heavy bolts and creaking lock gave the prisoner ample warning of a visitor. He raised his head. The jailer should not witness his despair. It was no official who entered, however. It was Marfa. Ostermann's heart hardened against her. His pale cheeks flushed. He was of those who find it easy to forgive the absent; the sight of the woman come to gloat over his misfortune angered him.

"Why am I thus honored, Madame?" he asked coldly.

"Andrei! Do not speak to me so. Can you not forgive me?"

"I should hardly suppose that my forgiveness matters much to you. My death would have been more useful."

She stood gazing at him in dull appeal. He had seldom shown her anything save the most patient courtesy; yet now, when she came to humbly beg for pardon, he was merciless.

"Ah! you are cruel!" she broke out passionately, with a break in her voice, which told of tears fiercely repressed.

"I am sorry you should think so; but you may permit me to remark that you have come out of your way to suffer from my cruelty. I fail to understand what brought you here at all."

"I cannot live unless you forgive me. Will you not believe that I never meant to injure you? Who could dream that Elizabeth would prove so cruel? I thought she could not do without you, and that she would have kept you as her Chancellor."

Ostermann smiled more kindly. He began to understand dimly.

"No man is indispensable," he observed.

"But you are so different! The Englishman said that it was you who held the Empire together; and even Elizavetta Petrovna told me that she would change nothing in your policy. She wishes to prove to the world that justice and mercy are not foreign qualities, which will be banished with you."

The words proved to the fallen Minister that his work was not in vain. It would live while he was dying in Siberia; and the knowledge comforted him. The triumph begun on the scaffold, where all admitted his real bravery, was increased now. He had left his mark on Russian history; and, for the moment at least, it was more the kindliness of his private character than his splendid intellect that told. He did not realize that, though. At present he was only thinking of the government of the Empire. Peace and mercy would give Russia all she needed.

"Thanks, Marfa, for telling me such good

news of the Empress's disposition. It will make a great difference to her country. After all, she is Peter's daughter, and may do well."

Marfa came a step nearer.

"Will you forgive me, Andrei?"

"Yes, if you desire it. I was wrong to receive you so ungraciously, but I was vexed by your coming. It appeared ungenerous on your part to show your joy over the fall of an old acquaintance."

"Don't say that! You offered once to be my friend, will you withdraw that now?"

"I have no choice. There can be no friendship between the Empress's favorite and an exile in Siberia. We shall be too far apart."

She fell on her knees beside him, and caught his hand in hers.

"Oh! Have mercy on me, Andrei, and let me go with you. I could not live here without you!"

"You do not think of what you are saying, child. Remember what Siberia means—the long, terrible journey, the life amid perpetual snow, the utter loneliness from all you love."

Marfa hid her face against his hand, kissing it passionately.

"I love no one but you, Andrei!"

The words and action moved him strangely, though he attributed them to generosity or repentance. He put his arm round her, and

drew her closer, caressing her as he would have petted a crying child.

"Dear little Marfa! How brave you are and generous, my heart of gold! But I will not accept your sacrifice. It is not only Siberia that would prove too hard for you. I am ill, broken down, ruined; I could do nothing to lighten your hardships, and might add to them. You would have earned so much gratitude that you would feel any unkindness from me doubly hard to bear; yet I might often be irritable or despondent. You are young, and need happiness and love."

Marfa looked up at him entreatingly.

"Do not reject me, my husband! I do not want love or gratitude, because I have not earned them. I might have helped you in your great work, and I hindered it. I shall never forgive myself, never! And if you leave me behind, it will break my heart!"

She broke off with a sob in her voice, and he strove to comfort her once more.

"You will make yourself miserable by brooding over the past, and it will do no good. I don't understand why you joined the conspiracy or came to watch the execution, if you cared so much."

His tone was so gentle that she did not guess how little he believed in her love.

"I wanted you to owe everything to me. I began before you were Chancellor, when Anna hampered you, and Bieren intrigued against you. Then I could not draw back. If I had warned you, it would have meant Vladimir's ruin. So I sank deeper until the end. I was with Elizabeth before she made the attempt to seize the Crown, and I heard her swear on the icon that, if she succeeded, she would never sign a death-warrant. That was why I knew you were safe that morning; for I had reminded her of the oath, and she dared not break it."

"It is as well that a vow should be heard by human ears; it has more chance of being kept. Well, if I owe my life to you, are you not satisfied?"

"Ah! but you owe your ruin to me, too!"

"I don't think so, little Marfa! The conspiracy might have existed just the same if you had not joined it; and your warning would have made no difference. I would not have acted sooner, and you see I was too late. I was weary of power, and shall be glad to rest. Berezoff is healthier than Saint Petersburg; so you need not trouble about me."

He would show her the bright side, to lessen her grief. Her visit had given him fresh courage. He was glad to know that the proud girl who had despised him, was converted now to

a more kindly attitude. That was, indeed, a personal triumph.

Marfa sighed.

"What is it, dear? Are you still sad?"

"You have not given any proof of your forgiveness," she pleaded. "If Siberia is so healthy and desirable for you, won't you let me come, too? I don't want anything but the chance of serving you. I used to treat you like a serf, when I was a silly, ill-bred child; now you ought to have your revenge. If you are cross to me, it will not matter; for I shall know I deserve all that and more. You might beat me if you liked, and I would not complain."

"And what about your friend Nadejda?"

She felt a pang of jealous pain that he should think of her at this moment.

"Oh! She has Aunt Tatiana to look after, and her father. You used to love her music, but she could not have taken her spinet to Siberia, while I can bring my balalaika and sing to you. I love you so much! Do not refuse my love."

"You must not tempt me too far, Marfa. There are others to be considered besides ourselves. If you came with me, you might bring down the displeasure of the Empress on your brothers. Have you thought of that?"

"They have nothing to hope or fear from her.

Vladimir is convinced that you were right about Razumoffski. He had a stormy scene with Elizabeth, and it has ended by his being sent off on a foreign mission. It will be years before he is allowed to come back."

"And Pavel?"

"He will not stay at Court without us. He hates La Chêtardie, in fact—" She broke off, blushing. There had been a duel, of which she could tell her husband later.

"So," she resumed, "he is going to live in the country, and try to educate the serfs. Aunt Tatiana and Nadejda will probably live with him; but I could never go back to the place where Mistress Christian was murdered. You see, I shall be homeless if you will not give me shelter."

And this time he believed.

THE END

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A SUMMER IN NEW YORK. By Edward W. Townsend, Author of "Chimmie Fadden."

The author's cheery humor characterizes this new "love story told in letters," but its characters are largely of the "smart set," and far removed from "Chimmie." The heroine and some others who figure in the story come from the great spaces outside the Metropolis, and increase the breeziness of the tale. The idea of these people making holiday in the city in the dog days is certainly a novel one. The characters and scenes are sketched in a few telling lines. The tower of the Madison Square Garden bathed in moonlight adorns the cover, while the illustrated chapter heads emphasize the local color.

TIOBA. By Arthur W. Colton.

Eleven tales presenting a gallery of very varied Americans. Mr. Colton's sympathy and descriptive power are notable, he has the saving grace of humor, and his stories make us think well of our fellow men. *Tioba* was a mountain which meant well but was mistaken. Other stories concern a country deacon and a Bowery boy at the battle of Fredericksburg; a tragedy in a meadow, in which it appears that death and sorrow are not less large because the actors are somewhat small; a comedy of hate; the falling in with certain outcasts of one who was unworldly; a return to the old home of childhood. In another tale, friends of Conlon the Strong sit at the bedside of that violent politician, and observe more things than they can account for. *St. Catherine's* and *The Spiral Stone* are to some extent allegorical. The *Musidora Sonnet* tells of that sonnet's origin in 10th St. There is a striking frontispiece by A. B. Frost.

THE TRIUMPH OF COUNT OSTERMANN. By Graham Hope.

The love story of Peter the Great's German prime minister. In the opening chapter a vivid picture is given of the semi-barbarous people that the great Czar was to mold into one of the leading nations of the earth. Peter, dissolute and violent, but glorified by his will and noble purpose, is strongly drawn. Along with Ostermann's experiences with his patrician wife is sketched his brave struggle to continue Peter's work in spite of the punier rulers that followed.

LORD LEONARD THE LUCKLESS. By W. E. Norris, Author of "Matrimony" and "No New Thing."

The story of an English peer of to-day who made a Moloch of the truth. The book is in a serious vein, and impressively tells a story that a less able writer would have been liable to make sensational. Some of the episodes are decidedly tragic, but Mr. Norris's humor does not desert him, and is used in effective contrast.

RED-HEADED GILL. By Rye Owen.

A very original story, though necessarily made as all stories now are, and as Shakespeare's plays were, of some of the material that has become standard. There is an element that in earlier times would have been called supernatural, around which are gathered characters and scenes that are strong, interesting and often beautiful; and there is withal a very saving sense of humor.

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